

THE HOUSE ON
THE HILL

By the same author

The Moon and the Bonfire
Among Women Only
The Devil in the Hills
The Political Prisoner

CESARE PAVESE

THE HOUSE ON
THE HILL

*translated from
the Italian by
W.*

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L o n d o n

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Even in the old days we referred to the 'hills' as we might have talked about the sea or the woods. I used to go back there in the evenings from the town when it grew dusk, and for me it was not simply a place like any other; it represented an aspect of things, a way of life. For me there was no difference between those hills and these ancient ones where I played as a child and live at the present time; the same sort of broken, straggling country, cultivated, yet wild, the same roads, farm-sheds and ravines. I used to go up there in the evenings as if I too was a fugitive from the nocturnal air-raid alarms; the roads were swarming with poor people who scattered over the fields to find somewhere to sleep, transporting their mattresses on their bicycles or on their backs, shouting and arguing, obstinate, credulous, good-humoured.

We began the ascent, and everyone talked about the doomed city, the night to come and the dangers that threatened. I who had lived up there for some time saw them thinning out as they turned off here and there, and eventually I found myself making my way up alone between the hedges and the low wall. Then I walked along, listening hard, looking up at the familiar trees, sniffing the scents of the earth and everything around me. I was not depressed; I knew that the town might go up in flames during the night and all the inhabitants be killed but the ravines, houses and footpaths would awaken in the morning calm and unchanged. I would

still look out on to the morning from the window that gave on to the orchard. I would at any rate sleep in a bed. Like me, the refugees of the fields and woods would go down to the city again, only more worn out and dazed than I was. It was summer, and I recalled evenings in the past when I lived in the city and had come back late at night, laughing and singing, and hundreds of lights dotted the hill and the city beyond the road. The city was like a lake of light. In those days I spent the night in the town. We did not know then that time was so short. Plenty of friends; plenty of days to spend in chance encounters. We lived -- or so we thought -- with each other and for each other.

I must add -- as I embark on this story of a protracted illusion -- that the War cannot be held responsible for what befell me. The War, I am convinced, might have been my salvation. When it came I had been living for some time in the villa up there where I rented some rooms, but if my work had not kept me in Turin, I would have already gone back to my old parents' home in the other hills. All the War did was to remove the last scruple I had about living alone, consuming the years and my own heart, and one fine day I realised that Belbo, my big dog, was the last genuine friend I had left. The war justified living from day to day without any regret for lost opportunities. But it was as if I had been waiting for the war a long time and had been counting on it; a war on such a vast and unprecedented scale that it was easy enough to go back home to the hills, curl up and let it blaze away in the sky above the city. Events were now happening that justified one merely keeping alive, without complaining.

almost without speaking about it. The kind of dull bitterness which had hedged in my youth found a refuge and a horizon in the war.

Once more, that evening, I was climbing the hill; it was getting dark and beyond the wall rose the outline of the ridges. Belbo, curled up on the path, was waiting for me at his usual place and I could hear him crying in the darkness. He was trembling and scratching the ground. He ran up to me, leaping high to lick my face, and I calmed him and talked to him until he stood down and ran ahead of me to sniff a tree-trunk, happy. When he realised that instead of embarking on the path, I was making for the wood, he bounded joyfully and darted off among the trees. It is pleasant to walk among the hills with a dog; as one goes along, he noses out roots, holes, ravines, undivined existences, thereby increasing for us the pleasure of discovery. Ever since childhood it has seemed to me that to go through the woods without a dog is to miss a large share of life and the earth's secrets.

I did not want to go back to the house until evening was well advanced since I knew that my female hosts would be waiting for me as usual and expect me to talk to them in return for their trouble in looking after me, the cold supper and their affability; and I would let them have a few rapid and disingenuous views on the war and the world in general which I had ready for the first-comer. Sometimes a new war event, a threat, a night of bombing and flames provided the two women with a pretext for meeting me on the doorstep, in the orchard or at the table, for chattering, expressing surprise, drawing me into the light to see who I was and

make sure I was one of them. But I preferred to take my supper in the darkened room alone and forgotten, straining my ears to catch every sound in the night, hearing the time go by. When the siren wailed over the distant city, my first feeling was one of frustration at the loss of solitude, irritation at all the nervousness and fuss up there, the two women extinguishing the already dimmed lamp, the anxious expectancy of some important happening. We all went out into the orchard.

Of the two I preferred the older woman, the mother who had something calm and down-to-earth about her bulk and infirmities, and one could imagine her under the bombing as a darkened hill might appear. She did not say much but she was a sympathetic listener. The other, her daughter, a forty-year-old spinster, was buttoned up and large-boned; she was called Elvira and lived in a perpetual panic lest the war should come up there. I realised that she felt anxious about me; indeed, she told me she suffered torments when I was in the city and on one occasion when her mother was chaffing her in my presence, Elvira retorted that if enemy bombs destroyed any more of Turin, I would have to spend day and night with them.

Belbo ran first in front of me, then behind me on the path, trying to induce me to plunge into the wood. But that evening I preferred to linger at a corner of the slope, bare of trees, where I could overlook the great valley and the hillsides. I liked the great hill in the dusk with its ups and downs of ridge and declivity. It had been just the same in the past but in those days it was sprinkled with so many lights, and, with all the people in their houses, breathed an atmosphere of peace.

repose and contentedness. Even now one could sometimes catch the sound of voices, bursts of laughter in the distance, but the great darkness weighed heavily on everything, and the earth had become wild and solitary again as I had known it in my childhood. Behind the tilled fields and the roads, the human dwellings, under one's feet, the age-old, indifferent heart of the earth brooded in the darkness, lived in hollows and among roots, lurked in hidden things, in infant fears. It was at this time that I began to find pleasure in childhood memories. It was as if beneath all the disillusionment and uncertainty and my desire to be alone, I was re-discovering myself as a boy in order to provide myself with a companion, a colleague, a little son. I was seeing once more the place where I had lived. We were on our own, the boy and myself. I re-lived the wild discoveries of the old days. It was true that I was not free from suffering but I bore it with the disgruntled attitude of one who neither recognises nor loves his neighbours. I communed with myself, alone, kept myself company. We were alone, just the two of us.

A buzz of voices mingled with snatches of song mounted the slope once again that evening. They came from the other side where I had never descended; they sounded like an echo of other times, the voice of youth. I remembered for a moment the parties of refugees who swarmed over the edges of the hill in the evening like trippers. But there was no movement, the sound continued to come from the same place. It was odd to think that under the threatening darkness, before the silenced city, a bunch of people, a family, folk from heaven knew where, were beguiling the hours of waiting

in song and laughter. I did not even stop to consider that it took courage. It was June, the night sky was beautiful; all one had to do was to surrender to it; but as far as I was concerned, I was content to be alone, free from ties with anyone. It seemed to me that I had always known that I would come to this kind of back-water, as it were, between hill and city, that perpetual anguish that never saw beyond the next day when one awoke, and I should have been very near to admitting it if I had someone to hear me. But only a sympathetic heart could have listened.

Belbo stood on the embankment, barking at the voices. I seized him by the collar, shut him up and listened harder. Among the half-drunken voices, I heard some clear ones and finally a woman's. Then they laughed, there was a confusion of noise and a very beautiful male voice rose up on the air.

I was on the point of retracing my steps when I said to myself "You're crazy. The old girls are waiting up for you. Let them wait".

In the dark I tried to guess the exact whereabouts of the singers. "At least they are people that you know", I said. I took hold of Belbo and pointed to the other slope. I murmured a snatch of the song and said, "Let's go over there". He darted off.

Then, guided by the voices, I followed the path.

I emerged on to the road and peered into the darkness, listening; from the other side of the ridge and almost submerged by the chirrup of grasshoppers floated the wail of the alert. Almost as if I was present, I was aware of the city freezing up, so to speak, the trample of the feet, the banging of doors, the streets becoming gloomy and deserted. But here the stars poured down their light. The singing in the valley had now ceased. A little distance away Belbo was barking. I ran up to him. He had dived into a courtyard and was jumping around among some people who had come out of a house. A light showed faintly through the half-closed door.

Someone called out: "Shut the door, you fool!" and they all laughed loudly. The door was pulled to.

Belbo was no stranger among them; the names of my two old ladies were mentioned good-humouredly; they accepted me without asking who I was. People were moving to and fro in the darkness; there were some young children among them; everybody was looking upwards. "Will they come--or not?" they were saying. They spoke about Turin, about their individual problems, the houses that had been demolished. One woman was sitting apart, moaning to herself.

"I thought there was some dancing here", I ventured.

"Indeed, yes", said the young man in the shadow who had previously been talking to Belbo. "But no one remembered to bring the clarinet".

"But would you have had the courage to?" questioned a girl's voice.

"*He* would dance if his house was on fire".

"That's true", said another voice.

"We can't, there's a war on. Italians" — at this point the voice took on a different tone — "I have made this war for you! I present it to you; you are worthy of it. You should not dance nor sleep any more. You should just make war, as I am doing".

"Put a sock in it, Fonso: what if they should hear you?"

"What do you want to do then? We can sing".

And the voice took up the song again but in a low, subdued tone, almost as if the owner was afraid of frightening the grasshoppers. The girls joined in; two of the youths ran off into the field. Belbo began to bark furiously.

"Be a good dog!" I said.

There was a table with a flask of wine and two glasses on it under the trees. The innkeeper, an elderly man, poured some out for me. It was a sort of country tavern, but all of them seemed to be relations who had come from Turin all together.

"It's all right while the weather lasts", said an old woman. "But wait till the rain and mud begin!"

"Don't worry, grandma, there's always a place for you here".

"It's nothing now: I'm thinking about the winter".

"The war will be over by winter", said a young boy, and darted off.

Fonso and the girls were singing still in hushed voices, ready to catch any distant hum, or roar of

engines. I too was straining to hear anything from one minute to the next above the chorus of grasshoppers, and when the old woman suddenly opened the door again, I also shouted at her to close it.

There was something familiar to me about these people, these young men, the way they joked, the easy friendliness of company and wine, something that reminded me of the town in the old days, other evenings spent in the country above the river Po, the different cafés by the town gateway, old friendships. And in the coolness of the hill, in the open spaces around, in the tension that prevailed during the alert, I re-discovered an older flavour, rural and remote. I instinctively followed the girls' and women's voices and fell silent myself. I rocked with inward laughter at Fonso's sallies. I had sat down on a beam with the others under the open sky.

A voice said to me, "And you, what are *you* doing? Are you on holiday?"

I recognised the voice. Now as I think back, I am sure I didn't have to ask myself twice. It was a rather brazen, husky, challenging voice. It seemed to me the typical female voice of that part of the world.

I replied jokingly that I was going truffle-hunting with the dog. She asked me if they ate truffles where I taught.

"Who told you that I taught?" I said, surprised.

"It's quite obvious", she replied in the darkness.

There was a trace of mockery in the voice. Or was it merely the sort of ironical banter heard at a masked ball. I thought back rapidly to my previous conversation with her but I could find no evidence of having given myself away, and concluded that the people who

knew the old ladies perhaps knew all about me. I asked her if she lived at Turin or up here.

"Turin", she said quickly.

Even in the darkness I could see that she was probably very handsome. The contours of her shoulders and legs were clean. She sat clasping her knees, and her head was thrown back in a contented attitude. I tried to scrutinise her face.

"You're not going to eat me, are you?" she threw at me.

At that moment I heard the all-clear. For a second everybody was silent; incredulous; then a cry of relief went up, and the boys leaped around, the old women mumbled a prayer of thanksgiving and the men reached out for their wine-glasses and beat a tattoo. "It's over for tonight". "They'll be returning later". "Italians, I have done this for you!"

She had not shifted her position. She was still sitting with her head thrown back against the wall when I whispered. "It's Cate. You are Cate, aren't you?" But she did not reply. I got the impression that she had closed her eyes.

I had to make a move now because they were all going home. I wanted to pay for the wine but they said, "Nonsense!" I bowed, shook Fonso's hand and somebody else's, summoned Belbo, and as if by magic found myself alone on the road staring at the dark façade.

A little later I was back in the villa. Meantime night had fallen, dark night, and Elvira was waiting for me, almost on the doorstep, her hands clasped and her lips compressed. "You were caught by the air-raid alarm tonight. We've been anxious". I merely shook my head.

and smiling into my plate, began to eat. She walked round me with the lamp, silent, disappeared into the kitchen and closed the cupboards. "I wish it could be like this every evening", I murmured. She did not reply.

As I ate, I thought of the encounter I had had, and of what had happened. I was thinking more about the time, the years that had gone by than about Cate. It was incredible. Eight, ten was it? It was as if I had re-opened a forgotten room, a neglected cupboard and had found someone else's life inside, a futile life, full of risks. It was this that I had forgotten. Not so much Cate nor the feeble amusements of the past but the youth who had lived those days, the rash youth who had run away from everything believing it might still happen, who thought of himself as a grown man and was continually looking about him, expecting life to begin in earnest. This was the youth who took me by surprise. What had I in common with him? What had I done for him? Those banal yet lively evenings, those casual adventures, those hopes as familiar to me as my bed or a window in my house — all seemed like the memory of a distant country, a life of agitation, so that, thinking back, one wondered how one could have enjoyed it and betrayed it thus.

Elvira took a candle and shut herself up in the depths of her room. She was outside the cone of light of the central lamp, which she told me to extinguish when I decided to come away. I could see that she was hesitating. Close to the room-switch was that of the outside light and sometimes I flooded the courtyard with light by mistake. I said curtly, "Don't worry. I'll switch the

right one off". She coughed, holding her hand against her throat, and forced a laugh. "Good night".

Well, I thought, as soon as I was alone, you are no longer the young man you were, you are no longer taking chances as you used to in the old days. This woman would like to tell you to come home earlier; she would like to have a chat with you, but she dare not; that's why she clutches her hands, grips hold of the cushion and holds her throat. She has not much to offer and she knows it. But seeing you live alone here leads her to self-deception and to the hope that you will pass all your life here in this room, under the light of this lamp, beside the pretty curtains, in the sheets she has washed for you. You realise all this but you don't take any more chances. Don't seek her out; seek out your hills instead!

I asked myself whether Cate of the old days had allowed herself to be deluded in this manner. What was Cate like eight years ago? An idle, mocking girl, thin, rather gawky, hot-tempered. When she went out with me, accompanied me to the cinema or the meadows, if she clutched my arm, hiding her broken finger-nails, it did not signify that she was expecting anything. It was the year when I rented a room in the via Nizza; I was doing my first teaching and ate mostly in milk-bars. The people at home sent me money. I did not need much for myself in those days. I had no prospects beyond those of any country youth who has completed his studies, resides in a town, keeps his eyes open, and to whom every morning offers hope of a new adventure. I saw lots of people, lived with the gang and wasted no opportunities. There were my school-friends, there was Gallo

who was destined to be killed by a bomb in Sardinia; there were the girls — friends' sisters for the most part — and Martino, the gambler who married the woman in the cash-desk; the loquacious and ambitious ones who wrote books, plays, poetry, which they carried round in their pockets and discussed in the cafés. We used to go dancing with Gallo up to the hills — he too hailed from my part of the world — we talked about opening a rural school; he would teach agriculture and I natural science; he would rent some land, start a nursery garden, carry out a plan of agricultural reform. I cannot recall how Cate got mixed up with us; she lived by the town gate, on the edge of the meadows leading down to the Po. Gallo moved in a different set from ours; he used to play billiards at a place at the bottom of via Nizza; one time when we were going boating, he went into a courtyard to give Cate a call. Then when summer came I took her out alone.

We left the boat moored against the bank when we were with Cate, went on to the grass and scrapped around among the bushes. I felt ill at ease with some women but not with her. With her you could be moody without losing ground. It was rather like being asked to have a drink at the pub; you don't expect a vintage wine but you know what you *will* get. Cate would sit down and allow herself to be fondled. Then she would get into a panic for fear anyone should see us. We did not waste time talking and that gave me courage. She did not want any speeches or promises from me. "What difference is there", I used to say to her, "between scrapping round and having a bit of a cuddle?" So on one or two occasions we lay on the grass in a half-

hearted way. Then a day came when we arranged on the tram beforehand to go and make love. One morning we had no sooner met than we were caught in a storm, and we cursed furiously, having to postpone the lost opportunity.

One evening Cate came running up my stairs to smoke a cigarette in peace and on that occasion we made love with more gusto on the bed, and she said how lovely it was when it rained and was cold, to come round and we could stay chatting together and exchange confidences. She stroked my books and sniffed at them for a joke and asked me if I really had the use of the room day and night without anyone coming to interrupt me. She lived with her family, six or seven of them in two rooms giving on to a courtyard. But that was the only evening on which she called for me. She came to the café instead where I used to see my friends. But although Gallo was present and they all had a word for her, she sat there ill at ease and no longer laughed as she used to. My own feelings at the time were mixed: I was proud to have a girl of my own but ashamed of the somewhat slovenly and inexperienced sort of person she was. She told me she wanted to learn typing and take a job in a big business and earn enough money to be able to afford to go and bathe at some spa. Occasionally, to her great delight, I bought her rouge. It was at this point that I learned that you can keep a woman, educate her, teach her how to behave, but you can know too much about what has gone to create the smart effect, and the appeal vanishes. Cate's dress was threadbare and the leather of her handbag was cracked. It was touching to see this great discrepancy between her life

and her ambitions; but the excitement I got from that rouge made it clear to me that as far as I was concerned her sole appeal was sex; sex somewhat tediously and embarrassingly manifest. The knowledge that she was so dissatisfied and ignorant was painful to me. She improved at times, but she was subject to foolish enthusiasms, sudden fits of obstinacy and ingenuousness which I found irritating. The idea of being in some way tied to her, being somehow in debt to her, for encroaching on her time, for example, weighed on me on every occasion. One evening under the station arcade I took her arm and tried to induce her to come up to my room. They were the last days of summer and my landlady's son was returning home next day from the farm and with him at home it was impossible to bring a woman back with me. I begged, entreated her to come, made a joke of it, played the fool. "I won't eat you", I said. But she wouldn't hear of it. "I won't eat you", I repeated. This obstinate bashfulness on her part nettled me. She clung to my arm and said, "Let's go for a walk".

"Then we'll go to the cinema", I said, laughing. "I've got some money".

She was put out. "I am not coming with you for your money".

"But I *am* coming with you", I blurted, "to go to bed". We flashed indignant glances at each other, both blushing hotly. Later I felt ashamed; I believe that I could have wept when I was alone with fury at myself, had not the emotion and pleasure at being free proved stronger. Cate was weeping; the tears were running down her cheeks. "I'll come with you then", she said in

a subdued voice. We arrived at the door without saying another word; she clung to me and leaned all her weight against my shoulder. She made me stop at the door. She pulled herself away and said, "No; I don't trust you", nipped my arm like a vice and ran off.

After that evening I saw no more of her. I was not unduly worried about the situation because I thought she would return. By the time I realised she was not going to, the pain I felt from her harsh treatment of me had worn off and Gallo and my friends became my horizon once more; in short I was already enjoying the pleasure one derives from nursing a grievance, of willingly rejecting opportunities, which was to become habitual with me. Not even Gallo said any more about it; he did not have time to. He went to the African front as a commissioned officer and I did not see him for some time. That winter I forgot all about his agriculture and his rural school; I became the complete townsman and felt that life was really fine. I went to lots of people's houses, talked politics, got to know other pleasures, became involved in further adventures but always managed to emerge unscathed. I embarked on some scientific work. I saw people and got to know my colleagues. I studied hard for some months and imagined a future for myself. The shadow of uncertainty that hung over us, the excitement in the people around me, the threat of imminent war made the days more thrilling and the adventures more futile. One could abandon oneself to it and then recover oneself; nothing happened, yet there was an air of expectancy. Tomorrow, perhaps?

But now things were happening and it was war. I

thought about it all during the night as I sat there under the lamp and my two old women slept composed, pathetic, peaceful. What did air-raid warnings matter in the hills when everybody was safely indoors and no light showed through the cracks? Cate, too, would be asleep in her house in the middle of the woods. Was she thinking still of my past behaviour? It seemed to me as if it had been only yesterday, and I was not displeased that our encounter had been of the briefest and in the dark.

I thought about it all for some days as I worked at Turin and on my way home in the evening, talking to Belbo. One night I was in the orchard when the alarm sounded again. The anti-aircraft battery opened fire. We withdrew to our room which was shaking under the explosions. Outside spent splinters hissed among the trees. Elvira was trembling all over; the old mother was silent. Then came the roar of the engines and more explosions. The window was a continual red glow, letting in a blaze of dazzling light. It went on for more than an hour, and when we went out amid the last detonations, the whole valley of Turin was in flames.

III

I returned to the city next morning with a crowd of people to the distant accompaniment of roars and explosions. People were running everywhere and carrying bundles with them. The asphalt of the avenues was pitted with holes, scattered with layers of leaves, and here and there were pools of water. It looked as if there had been a violent hailstorm. The last conflagrations were crackling raw and red in the clear light of day.

The School was, as usual, still intact. I was welcomed by old Domenico who was impatient to go off and view the damage. He had already been out before dawn, at the all-clear, the time when everybody emerges from his hole and the light penetrates -- so considerable were the fires -- through the door partially opened by some student-teacher, has a drink and is glad to meet his fellows again. . . . He told me what the night had been like in our air-raid shelter where he slept. No lessons that day, of course. Furthermore even the trams were not running: there they stood with their doors open, empty where they had been when the catastrophe had overtaken them. All the wires were down. The walls were scored as by the wing of some maddened fire-bird. "A terrible road, not a soul about", Domenico kept saying. "My secretary hasn't been seen yet. Nor Fellini. It's impossible to get hold of news of any sort"

A cyclist came by, put his feet down, and told us that Turin had been completely destroyed. "Thousands of dead", he told us. "They have smashed up the station,

gutted the markets. It has been given out on the wireless that they will be returning tonight". And he pedalled off without looking back.

"He can talk all right", murmured Domenico. "I can't understand Fellini. He is usually here by now".

Our road was in truth peaceful and deserted. The clump of trees of the school-yard topped the old wall like a provincial garden. Even the everyday noises, the rattle of trams, the hubbub of voices did not penetrate as far as this. Not hearing the trampling of boys' feet made it like old times. It seemed unbelievable that destruction had raged among these houses in the darkness of the night and beneath the present calm sky. I told Domenico to go off if he wished to look for Fellini. I would remain in the porter's lodge and wait for them.

I spent the morning getting the class-register up to date for the impending inspection. I totted up figures; wrote reports. Now and again I raised my head in the direction of the corridor and the empty class-rooms. I thought of the women who lay out corpses, wash and dress them. Any moment the sky might be filled with roaring engines, become a blaze of fire and nothing remain of the school but a cavernous hole. Life, just keeping alive was all that mattered. Registers, schools and corpses had already become things of no importance.

I felt like an old woman mumbling prayers as I muttered the boys' names in the silence. I smiled to myself. I saw the boys' faces again. Had any of them been killed in the night? Their cheerful excitement the day after an air-raid — in anticipation of a holiday, the novelty and general interruption of routine — was akin

to the pleasure I felt every evening when the siren sounded at finding myself in the cool bedroom and stretching myself out peacefully on the bed. How could I smile at their lack of conscience? We all lacked conscience in this war, for everyone of us these frightful experiences had become commonplace, routine, disagreeable. Whoever took them seriously and said "It's war", was even worse: he was mad, he must have taken leave of his senses.

And yet that night some people had died. Scores, if not thousands. Plenty, anyhow. I thought of the people who stayed in the town. I thought of Cate. I had got it into my head that she would not come up every evening. I seemed to have heard something to this effect in the yard and in point of fact since the time of the alarm, they had not done any more singing. I asked myself if I had anything to say to her, if something about her was frightening me. What I really missed was the darkness, the atmosphere of that house and the wood, the youthful voices, the novelty of it all. Perhaps Cate had not joined in the singing that night. Unless something has gone wrong, I thought, they will be back this evening.

The telephone bell rang. It was a boy's father. He wanted to know if there were really no lessons. What a dreadful affair last night had been. Were all the masters, including the Headmaster, safe and sound? Was his son studying physics now? War, of course, was war. How patient we must be. Understanding and helping families as we did. His respects and apologies.

From that moment the telephone never ceased ringing. Boys, colleagues and the secretary. Fonso rang up from the 'Devil's House'. "Are you working?" he said, sur-

prised. I could picture the sneer of displeasure spreading over his face. "No; there's no one at the porter's lodge. What do you think we're doing, celebrating a holiday? Come straight away and lend Domenico a hand". I rang off. I went outside. I had nothing more to add. It seemed out of place after a night like the one just past. I spent the morning strolling round among the ruins in the sunshine. Some people were moving about, others stood staring. Smoke was rising from the gutted houses. The cross-roads were blocked with traffic. Above, between broken-down walls, strips of carpet and articles of washing hung in the sunshine. It was difficult to distinguish between the new ruins and the old. One just got a general effect and the impression that no two bombs ever seem to fall in the same place. Inquisitive cyclists, bathed in sweat, rested their feet on the ground, stood and stared, and then rode off to see further sights, a curiosity doubtless prompted by a superstitious love of their fellow-men. On the pavement where there had been a fire, tables, mattresses and broken furniture were being piled up. An old woman was getting it all out unaided. The crowd stared. Every now and again we looked up at the sky.

It was odd to see solders. When they marched up in patrols with their shovels and steel helmets, it was obvious that they were going to remove the debris from the shelters and extract the living and the dead, and one felt a desire to urge them on, call out to them to get a move on for God's sake. They weren't any use for anything else, we said to each other; so much did we feel convinced that the war was lost. But the soldiers marched slowly, made a detour of the craters, and they

too turned round to glance at the houses. A pretty woman went by and they greeted her in chorus. The soldiers were the only ones who were aware that women still existed. No one had taken any notice of women for some time now in the city that was so disorganised and in a constant state of 'alert'; nobody followed them, not even those in summer dresses, and even when they smiled. I had anticipated the war in this too; as far as I was concerned there had been no danger to me from that quarter for some time. If I was not entirely free of desire, I had no more illusions.

Customers were talking in hushed voices in a café where I was reading a newspaper — for papers were still being published — which stated that the war was a tough business but that it was our war, waged in faith and passion, our last remaining possession. It appeared that bombs had fallen on Rome too, destroying a church and desecrating graveyards. This event created a bond between the living and the dead; it was the last of a ruthless series that had roused the indignation of the whole civilised world. This last indignity should give us faith. A point had been reached when things could not become worse. The enemy was becoming desperate.

A customer I knew, a fat jovial man, said that the war was really won already. "I look round me, and what do I see?" he shouted. "Trains loaded up, wholesale trade flourishing, black market and money. Hotels working at full pressure; likewise businesses, people working and spending everywhere. Is anybody giving in; anybody who dare talk of our softening up? Because three or four houses are demolished, a matter of no importance. Anyhow, the government is paying for

them. If we've got to this stage in three years, surely we can hope that it will last a little longer. After all, we are all capable of dying in our beds".

"The government can't be blamed for what is happening", said someone else. "Where should we be with another government?"

I went away; I knew all this before. Outside a large fire which had damaged a *palazzo* in the avenue was dying down. Porters were carrying chandeliers and armchairs outside. They had piled up furniture in the sun: tables with mirrors, large chests with no semblance of order. These handsome articles of furniture might have been in an expensive shop window. I thought back to the old days -- the houses, the evenings, the conversations, my sudden outbursts of fury. Gallo had been some little time in Africa; I had been studying at the Institute. It was the year when I still had faith in scientific study as essential to the life of the citizen, in academic science with its laboratories, congresses and professorships. It was the year of great adventures. When I got acquainted with Anna Maria and wanted to marry her. I was to be her father's assistant. I would travel. There were armchairs and cushions in her house; they talked theatre and mountaineering. Anna Maria shrewdly appealed to the countryman in me, saying that I was different from the others and praised my scheme for rural schools. But when she spoke about Gallo she treated him as an outsider. It was in Anna Maria's company that I learned how to talk without saying too much, and how to send flowers. We went out together all through the winter and one night in the mountains she called me into her bedroom. From that moment she

had me on a string and made an abject slave of me without giving me any feeling of security. Every day she had some new whim and jeered at me for being so long-suffering. When inevitable scenes ensued — with threats and wild glances — she too could become taciturn and weep like a child. She said she could not make me out and that I made her shudder. To settle it once and for all, I wanted to marry her. I proposed to her everywhere — on the stairs, at dances, under doorways. She put on a mysterious act and smiled at me.

This went on for three years and I was on the point of committing suicide. She was not worth killing. But I lost my enthusiasm for science, for society and for scientific institutes. I felt I was a countryman again. As the war did not happen that year (I still had faith that the war would settle something) I applied for a post as a teacher and began my present way of life. I can smile now about flowers and cushions but when I spoke about them with Gallo to begin with, the memory was still painful. Another time, when he was in uniform, he said, "It's all a lot of nonsense. It gets us all some time or other". But he did not realise that what 'gets us' is not merely a matter of chance. In a sense I continued to suffer not because I missed Anna Maria so much as because every thought of a woman held the same threat for me. If I shut myself up more and more in my disillusionment it was because this disillusionment was becoming a necessity to me. Because I had always been chasing after it and not only with her.

Such were my thoughts as I stood in front of the gutted *palazzo*. Beyond the avenue, among the trees, stretched the great ridge of the hills, green and lofty in

the summer air. I wondered why I stayed on in the city and did not escape up there before evening. Usually the alert sounded at night, but Rome, for example, had had it the day before at noon. In any case during the first days of the war I did not go down into the shelter; I forced myself to remain in the classroom, striding to and fro, trembling. In those days the air-raids were a joke. Now they were on a vast and terrible scale; the mere wail of the siren put me in a panic. If I stayed in the town until evening, that was certainly not the reason. A whole class of people, the fortunate ones, the 'top-drawer', went - if they had not already gone -- into the country, to their villas or to the seaside. There they continued their normal lives. It was left to the servants, the porters, the poor folk to look after their mansions for them, and save their stuff if there was a fire. It was left likewise to the porters, soldiers, engineers. Then they too escaped at night to the woods and the taverns. They did not sleep much. They drank chiefly. They argued with each other - as many as ten of them tucked away in a hollow. I felt a sense of shame for not being one of them and I would have liked to have met them on the avenues to chat. Or maybe I was merely enjoying the slight risk and was not doing anything to change my present way of going on. I liked being alone, thinking how I had no one waiting for me.

IV

I went back that evening in the moonlight and chatted in the orchard after supper as my old ladies liked me to. Egle, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who had been entrusted to Elvira's care, had come from the neighbouring house. They were saying that the schools ought to close down and that it was a crime to continue dragging the children into the town.

"What about the teachers? And the caretakers?" I added. "And the tramwaymen. And the women in the bar cash-desks?"

My jokes annoyed Elvira. Egle looked at me narrowly.

"Do you mean what you say?" she asked me suspiciously. "Or are you joking tonight too?"

"It's the soldiers' job to carry on the war", said Elvira's mother. "It's never been like this before".

"It's all of our job", I said. "They will call on every one in turn".

The moon was setting behind the trees. It would be full in a few nights and would flood both sky and earth, revealing Turin, and bringing a further load of bombs.

"Some say", said Egle suddenly, "that the war will be over this year".

"Over", I retorted. "It hasn't begun yet".

I stopped. I listened hard and noticed a startled look in their eyes. Elvira recovered herself and everybody fell silent. "Someone is singing", broke in Egle, relieved.

"A good job".

“The fools”.

I left Egle at the gate. I was alone in the middle of the trees and I could not find the road immediately. Belbo was following one of his trails and was panting among the brambles. I wandered about vaguely, as one does in the moonlight, losing myself among the trees. Once again Turin, the shelters, the air-raid alarms seemed remote, fantastic things. Even the encounter I was hoping for, the voices in the air, even Cate herself was unreal. I asked myself what I would not give to have a chat with Gallo, for example.

When I reached the road, my thoughts had returned to the war, all those who had died in vain. The courtyard was empty. They were singing in the meadow behind the house, and although Belbo had remained half-way up the slope, no one had noticed me. I could see the window-gratings, the small stone tables, the half-open door in the hazy shadow. The previous year's corncocks were dangling from a wooden balcony. The whole place had an abandoned, almost rustic air about it.

“If Cate comes out”, I reflected, “she may tell me anything, just to get her own back”.

I was on the point of going away and plunging back into the woods. I hoped that Cate was not there, that she had remained at Turin. But a small boy came running round the corner and stopped. He had spotted me.

“Is there anyone there?” I asked him.

He looked at me rather doubtfully. He was fair-skinned, dressed in a sailor-suit, looking almost comic in the pale moonlight. I had not noticed him on the first evening.

I went to the door and called after him. "Mummy!" he called. Cate came out carrying a plate of vegetable peelings. Just then Belbo dashed up, rolling over, and darting into the shadow. The boy clung to Cate's skirt, frightened.

"Silly boy", said Cate. "It's nothing".

"So you're still alive?" I remarked to Cate.

She had moved towards the grating to throw out the peelings. She stopped halfway and turned her head. She held it higher than she used to -- I recognised her mocking smile. "Are you going for a walk?" she asked. "Do you come out specially to take a walk?"

"I didn't hear you singing last night and I thought you'd stayed behind in Turin".

"Dino", she said to the boy. She threw the peelings away and sent him into the house with the plate.

When she was alone she stopped laughing. "Why don't you go with the others?" she said.

"He's your son, isn't he?" I replied.

She looked at me without opening her lips.

"Are you married?"

She shook her head emphatically -- another trait I remembered --- and said, "What's that to you?"

"He's a handsome lad and well set up", I remarked.

"I take him in to Turin. He goes to school", she said. "We come up here before nightfall".

I could see her clearly in the moonlight. She was the same but yet seemed like a different person. She spoke with great self-possession, though it seemed only yesterday that I had taken her arm. She was wearing a short skirt of the kind they wear in the country.

"You are not singing then?" I asked her.

She gave the same hard smile as before, tossed her head in the same way. "Have you come to hear us sing? Why don't you go back to your café?"

"Fool", I said with the sort of smile I had lately acquired. "Are you still thinking of those days?"

I noticed the old familiar sensual lips but they were firmer, more compact. The boy came out into the courtyard again and Belbo began to bark. "Here, Belbo", I called out. Dino passed by and ran into the house.

"You won't believe it", I said to Cate. "But this dog is my sole companion".

"It's not yours", she said.

Then I asked her jokingly if she knew everything about me. "I know nothing about *you*", I said. "What sort of life have you had, how do you live at the present time? I suppose you know that Gallo was killed in Sardinia?"

"It's not true!" Cate said, upset. I told her how it had happened and she was almost in tears "So that's what war is", she remarked. "The mad fool". She was beside herself; she looked down on the ground, her brow furrowed.

"And what have you done?" I said. "Have you been an errand-girl then?"

She pulled a wry face and asked me again if it mattered to me. We were standing face to face. I took her hand. But I did not want her to think that I was making light of the past. I touched her wrist gently. "Are you not going to tell me about the sort of life you have led?"

An old, stupid-looking woman came out and said, "Who's there?"

Cate told her it was I. The old woman came for a chat. Just then the moon went down.

"Dino has gone off with the others", said Cate.

"Why don't you make him change out of his sailor-suit?" asked the old woman. "You know he'll soil the seat of his trousers on the grass".

Cate made some remark and I said something or other about the moon. We strolled together in the direction of the meadow. They had stopped singing and were laughing. In our short walk I discovered that the old woman was Cate's grandmother, that the house was an inn, *Le Fontane*, but now the war was on, no one came.

"If this war doesn't end soon", said the woman, "your grandfather will sell up and go and live under the bridges".

There were only a few of them behind the house on this occasion, Fonso, another man and two girls. They were eating apples under a tree, knocking them down from low branches. They were munching away and laughing. Dino had stopped by the edge of the meadow and was watching them.

Cate went up to them and started to talk. I stayed with the old woman in the shadow of the house.

"There were more people here the other night", I said. "I suppose they have stayed behind in Turin".

The old woman said, "We haven't all got motor cars. Some people work until night. The trams aren't running". Then she looked at me and lowered her voice. "The people who are giving the orders are a dirty lot", she muttered. "Dirty Fascists. They don't give us a thought. Look whose hands they've put us in".

I motioned to Fonso in the distance. He had shouted something at me, waving his hand at the same time. They were shouting at each other, snatching apples and running. Cate turned towards us.

They called out from the house. A door had opened in the darkness and somebody said, "It's time, Fonso".

Then all of them, girls, youths and the child ran towards us, passed by and disappeared.

The old woman heaved a sigh as she moved away. "Well, I hope the others can come to some sort of agreement. After all they don't eat each other - it will be us who will suffer".

I stayed alone with Cate. "Are you coming to listen to the wireless?" she said

She walked a few yards with me, then stopped.

"You're not a Fascist, I hope", she said.

She was serious but she laughed. I took her hand and snorted. "We all are, my dear Cate", I said gently. "If we weren't, we should rise in revolt and throw bombs, risk our skins. Anyone who lets things go on as they are is a Fascist".

"That's not true", she said. "They are biding their time. The war's got to finish first".

She was full of indignation. I continued to hold her hand.

"You didn't used to know about all these things".

"And I suppose you do nothing. And what about your friends?"

Then I told her I had not seen my friends for some time. Some had got married, some had gone to live elsewhere. "Do you remember Martino? He got married in a bar".

We laughed together over Martino. "It happens to them all", I went on. "They pass months, years together, then it happens. One man loses a job, another removes, and you can't even remember one you see every day".

Cate said the war was to blame.

"It's always been this war", I said. "One fine day, we find ourselves alone. It's not so bad then". She looked me up and down. "Every now and again one finds somebody".

"And what does that matter to you? You haven't anything to do and you want to be on your own".

"That's true", I said. "I like being alone".

Then Cate told me about herself. She had been working, she said. She had been in a factory, a waitress in a hotel, a helper at a holiday camp. At the moment she went to lend a hand at a hospital every day. The old house in the via Nizza had been demolished and they had all been killed the year before.

"Did I upset you that evening, Cate?" I asked.

She looked at me, smiling equivocally. More as a formal question than anything else, I added, "Are you married then, or not?"

She quietly shook her head.

Someone has been more of a blackguard than me, I thought to myself. "Is that boy your son?" I said aloud.

"And what if he were?" she said.

"Aren't you ashamed?"

She shrugged her shoulders as she used to in the old days. I thought she was laughing. But instead she said in a husky, quiet voice, "Corrado, let us leave it at that.

I don't want to say any more. May I still call you Corrado?"

I felt less upset at that moment. I realised that Cate was not considering taking up with me again. I understood that she had her own life and that was enough for her. What I had feared was that she would show the same mixture of passion and shame as in the past and would give vent to it.

"You fool", I said. "You can call me what you like".

Belbo sidled up and I put my hand on his neck. At that point they all emerged from the dark house, chattering and shouting.

V

The month of June came to an end; the schools were closed and I spent the whole time in the hills. I wandered about in the sun on the wooded slopes. Behind *Le Fontane* the earth was layed out in fields and vineyards and I often went along there in the sheltered hollows in search of wild flowers and mosses, the passion of my boyhood days when I was studying botany. I preferred the tilled fields and the surrounding edges where nature was encroaching, to the villas and gardens. *Le Fontane* was ideally situated; the woods began at that point. I saw Cate on other occasions in the morning and evening but we did not talk about ourselves; I got to know Fonso and other men in the neighbourhood.

I argued light-heartedly with Fonso — he was only a boy still, not yet eighteen. “As far as this war is concerned”, I said to him, “we are all in it. They will call you up when you’re twenty and me at forty. How are we getting on in Sicily?”

Fonso was a messenger boy in an engineering firm; he used to come up every evening with his mother and sister and tear off again on his bicycle at breakneck speed.

He was cynical and humorous; he would suddenly get excited about things.

“If they call me up”, he said, “I’ll blow the place up, I’ll give you my word”.

“You’re just the same as the rest. If the war affects

you. People always wait until they burn their own fingers before they wake up".

"If all the chaps who were called up could only rouse themselves", said Fonso, "it wouldn't be bad for a start".

The year before, at evening school, Fonso had formed a taste for statistics, newspapers, and current affairs in general. He must have had fellow-workers at Turin who were opening his eyes for him. He knew everything about the war; he never gave the subject a rest; he would ask something and interrupt the reply with a further question. He would also discuss scientific matters and principles with enthusiasm.

When I was talking he asked me if I was ready to take some active step while I was a civilian.

"One needs a pretty deft hand", I replied. "You've got to be younger. It's no use footling round. Terrorism is the only way. We are at war".

Fonso said it wasn't necessary. The Fascists had the wind up. They knew they'd lost the war. They no longer arm the people. All they were waiting for was an opportunity to give way, disappear in the crowd and say, "Now you can take over". The whole thing was like a castle of cards.

"Do you think so? They have everything to lose. They won't yield till they're dead men".

The other men, the womenfolk and Cate's grandmother were listening.

"If he says they're a rotten lot", interposed the hostess, "you can take his word for it. He knows; just let it alone!"

Everyone at *Le Fontane* knew that I was a teacher, a

scientist. They treated me with great respect. Even Cate was submissive on occasion.

"This government can't last", the old man went on.

"But that's just why it does last. Everybody says, 'It's dead', and no one does anything about it".

They were all silent and looked at me.

"Murder the lot", I said. "Take the initiative from them. And go on with the war here at home. You'll never convert that lot. They will only keep quiet if they know that a bomb is going to explode as soon as they move".

Fonso sighed and was on the point of interrupting.

"Would you do it?" asked Cate.

"No", I replied. "*We* can't".

Cate's old grandmother looked at us with eyes full of reproach. "You people", she said. "You don't know what it costs. Loading up your conscience doesn't help anyone. Even these men will die sometime".

Fonso then explained to her how the calling-up system worked.

I went up to *Le Fontane* almost every night now and listened to the wireless with the rest of them. My two old women would not hear of trying to get London. "It's not allowed", said Elvira. "It would be heard from the road". They complained because I wandered round the woods at night too while the air-raids were on. Another terrible one took place at Turin. The next day the two women found a bomb splinter in the orchard; it was as sharp and heavy as the blade of a hoe. They called out to me to come and see it. They begged me not to take any risks. Then I said that there were plenty of inns and I could take cover anywhere.

It gave me a sense of adventure to arrive at *Le Fontane* in broad daylight. I came out from the bank on to the lonely road which at one time had been macadamised. I was a couple of yards away from the crest and there were woody ridges all round me. I thought back to the time when the road was frequented by motorists, pedestrians and cyclists. Now a pedestrian on it was an event.

I lingered in the courtyard to have a bite of fruit or a drink. The old woman offered me coffee, sugar and a glass of water. I ordered wine to provide a pretext for paying her something. I did not go up there at that time of day to see Cate; I did not go to see anyone in particular. If Cate happened to be there, I would watch her bustling round, ask her what they were talking about in Turin. Often my real reason for hanging around was the sheer pleasure of feeling myself close to the woods and of showing myself in that region. The familiar table, the well-known faces, my extended leave of absence delighted me in that July sunshine, its savage, steady heat. On one occasion Cate showed herself at the window and said, "It's you, then". But she did not even come down.

But Dino, her son, never failed to be there in the yard or behind the house. When class was over he was now in his grandmother's hands. She let him wander round, washed his face with a flannel and summoned him to meals. Dino was no longer the pallid and bewildered boy he had been that night. He ran about, threw stones, and wore his shoes out. He was just a lean urchin. I somehow felt bad about him. As I looked at him, I thought of Cate's previous annoyance with me.

her inept body, the shame of those days. It must have been in the year when I was taken up with Anna Maria. Cate, alone and humiliated, had been unable to defend herself; somehow it had happened — at a dance or in a meadow with a man she despised, some poor fellow, some local 'Adonis'; or had it been a hot-blooded lady-killer who had been responsible? Would she ever tell me? If we had not parted company that evening at the station, who knew, perhaps the child would never have been born.

Dino's hair hung over his eyes and he wore a darned pullover. He boasted to me a good deal about his school and his copy-books. I told him that I had not studied as many different subjects as he had, but that at any rate I had done some drawings in my time, too. Drawings of small stones, hazel-nuts and rare plants. I drew some for him. The same day he followed me to the hill, collecting mosses. He was happy discovering the moss-flowers. I promised that next day I would bring my lens along and he immediately wanted to know how much it magnified.

"These violet-coloured clusters of flowers", I explained, "look as big as roses and carnations".

Dino trotted behind me homewards and wanted to come as far as the house in order to try out my lens. He spoke clearly, without stumbling over his words, sure of himself as if he was talking to a contemporary in age. I asked him not to be too formal in the way he addressed me and to talk to me as he did to his mother.

"Are you like mummy too?" he said suddenly. "Do you want us to lose the war?"

"Do you like the war, then?" I said.

Dino looked pleased. "I should like to be a soldier and fight in Sicily". Then he asked me whether there would be fighting here too.

"There is already", I said. "Are you afraid of air-raid alarms?"

Not at all. He had been to see where bombs had fallen. He knew all the different types of aeroplane engine and make. He had three old bomb-sticks at home. He asked me if it were possible to collect rifle-bullets the day after a battle.

"The bullets themselves", I said, "may land anywhere. The cartridge cases and the dead are all that remain on the battlefield".

"There are vultures in the desert", said Dino. "They bury the dead".

"Devour them", I said. He laughed

"Does your mummy know you want to go and fight?"

We went into the courtyard. Cate and the old woman were sitting there under the trees.

Dino lowered his voice. "Mummy says war is a disgrace. That the Fascists are to blame for everything".

"Are you fond of your mummy?" I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders, very much man to man. The two women were watching our arrival.

Those days I did not know whether Cate approved of my being with Dino. The old woman certainly did. I took him off her hands. Cate watched him hanging round me with some surprise, picking flowers, snatching my magnifying glass, and sometimes I called him back to me in the somewhat peremptory manner one adopts towards children lacking in respect for their

elders. Then he would run and show her his drawings or the parts of a flower. I shouted to her that I would bring a book on plants. Cate took hold of him, tidied his hair and made some remark to him. I almost preferred the times when Cate was absent.

I concluded that Cate was jealous of her son. One evening I caught a hint of scorn in the way she was looking at me. "Cate, am I upsetting you?" I said in a quiet, light-hearted manner. She was taken by surprise and lowered her eyes and her voice at the same time. "Why?" she stammered. Ordinarily she cut short such inquiries.

"We were just being boys together", I remarked. "One never learns things at the right time".

But by then she had raised her head again and was shouting across the courtyard.

Shortly afterwards she said to me, "Do your women know that you demean yourself by talking to us? Do you tell them when you return at night that you have been to the inn? What's the name of that ugly bitch who wants to marry you? Elvira?"

I had said all that to her in fun. "What has come over you?" I asked her. "I come with you because I like you. I like all the people here. I like wandering in the woods and the roads. I am on the same sort of good terms with you as I am with the hills".

"But do you tell that to Elvira?"

"What's Elvira to do with it?"

"Elvira is your dog's mother", she said quietly. "Doesn't she expect you to give an account of where you've been all day?"

"Elvira is an idiot".

"But you seem to get on as well there as you do with us".

"Surely you can't be jealous, Cate?"

"But who should I be jealous of? Don't make me laugh. Perhaps I'm jealous of Fonso?"

"But Fonso is a boy", I exclaimed. "Why do you drag him into it?"

"We're all boys as far as you're concerned", she retorted. "Just like your dog".

I couldn't get any more out of her that evening. Fonso came along and the girls, Dino too. We chatted and listened to the others; someone sang. There were some new faces. A married couple who had had their house blitzed - acquaintances of Fonso's - were having a drink. Then when it was time, Cate chased after Dino, who kept running away, to pack him off to bed. They all chased him round and in the darkness someone called out "Corrado". "Corrado", they all said. Whoever answered to the name of Corrado obeyed.

V I

As soon as Cate had gone out into the courtyard again I went to meet her. She had not noticed anything. Perhaps she thought that I wanted to talk about Elvira again and she gave me a disdainful glance and stopped.

"They are calling Corrado", I said.

She looked at me, somewhat taken aback.

"It's my own name", I said to her.

She tossed her head in her characteristically confident manner. She looked at the others, at the tables in the shadow. "Go away - - they'll see us!" she whispered in a panic.

I swung round to go beside her. We started to walk away and she said lightly, "Didn't you know that Corrado was his name?"

"Why did you call him that?"

She gave a shrug and did not reply.

"What age is Dino?" I said, making her stop.

She seized hold of my arm and said, "Later. Don't worry me now".

That evening there was a great deal of talk about the war and air-raid warnings. Fonso's friend had been wounded in Albania and was relating what they had all known now for some little time. "I tried to get married just to be able to sleep in a bed", he said. "And now even the bed has gone". "We will sleep in the fields, don't worry", interrupted his wife. I had sat down next to the old woman and I was scrutinising Cate's profile in silence. I had the feeling of having found someone

new that night, of having spoken to her without knowing who she was. On each occasion I had been blinder than before. It had taken me a month to tumble to the fact that 'Dino' was a curtailed diminutive for Corrado. What was Dino's face like? I closed my eyes but was unable to conjure it up.

Suddenly I leapt to my feet to walk in the courtyard. "Shall I come with you?" asked Cate, also rising to her feet. I walked along feeling sick; my life seemed to be tumbling about me in ruins. It was like being in the air-raid shelter when the roof shook. "There were so many things I could do", one said to oneself.

We strode along in the dark. Cate did not break the silence. She clung to my arm for support as she hopped along beside me, and said quietly, "Support me, Corrado". I did so. We stopped.

"It was wrong of me, Corrado, to call him Dino. But you see, it is of no account. We never call him by the full name".

"Then why did you give him it?"

"I was fond of you. You know that I was fond of you, surely?"

Why now, I thought, you should have told me before.

"If you care for me at all", I said brusquely, gripping her arm, "tell me whose son Corrado is?"

She tugged her arm free without a word. She was strong. Stronger than me. "Don't worry", she said, "don't be afraid. You were not responsible".

We stared at each other in the darkness. I felt exhausted; I was hot and covered with sweat. There had been a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"What did you say?" she said, eagerly.

"Nothing", I replied, "nothing. If you are fond of me . . .".

"You no longer mean anything to me, Corrado".

"If you gave him my name, how could you suddenly make love with another man, that same winter?"

In the darkness I managed to control my voice; I spoke humbly, I felt in a magnanimous mood. I was speaking to the Cate of the old days, the girl who was helpless.

"You made love to me", she added quietly. "And you didn't care a damn about me".

That was another question, and what reply could I make? But I found one. She said it was possible to make love and think of something else at the same time.

"You know it very well", she repeated. "You aren't fond of anyone and yet you made love to heaps of women".

Once more I assured her that I had not thought of such things for some time.

She turned to me and said, "It was you".

"Cate", I said, becoming angry. "Tell me at least who it really was".

She smiled again, and again ignored my question. "I have already given you an account of my life during those years. I have worked hard all the time and had plenty on my plate. It was terrible at first. But I had Dino; there was no question of my playing the fool. I remembered what you said to me at one time: that life had no value unless you lived for something or someone . . .".

So I had taught her that. I recognised the phrase. If

I asked you who you lived for? I said within myself, what reply would you give?

"You don't hate me, then", I stammered, smiling. "There was something worthwhile between us? You can think back to those days without resentment?"

"You were all right in those days".

"And now?" I added stupidly. "And now you're fed up with me, I suppose".

"Now you seem unhappy and make me feel bad about you", she said gravely. "You live alone with your dog. It distresses me".

I looked at her, surprised. "Am I no longer any good, Cate? Even with you am I no better than I was in the old days?"

"I don't know", she said. "You're all right like this, but you have no particular purpose in life. You let things slide and inspire no confidence. You haven't got anyone and you don't even get worked up about anything".

"But I got worked up about Dino", I said.

"You don't seem to care for anybody".

"Should I be kissing you, Cate?"

"Idiot", she exclaimed, still quite calm. "That's not my point. If that's what I had wanted, you would have been kissing me some time ago". She lapsed into silence for a while, then went on. "You are just like a boy, a proud boy. Like one of those boys in whose lives something has gone wrong but they don't want to hear it mentioned; they don't want people to know that they are suffering. That's why I feel distressed about you. When you talk to the others you always seem resentful and malicious. You are afraid, Corrado".

"It's the war; the bombs".

"No; it's you", said Cate. "It's the way you live. Just now you've been afraid for Dino. Afraid he was your son".

They were summoning us from the courtyard. They were calling Cate by name.

"Let's go back", said Cate submissively. "Don't worry. No one's going to disturb your peace".

She had taken me by the arm and I stopped her short. "Cate", I said, "if this business about Dino were true, I should want to marry you".

She looked at me quite unperturbed and without a smile.

"Dino is my son", she said quietly. "Let's go".

So I spent another night like the previous one when I first found her again. On the present occasion Elvira had been in bed some time. Now that I passed my days and nights in the hills, she knew she had me safely on a string, and she let me indulge my whims. She chaffed me because, for all my mosses and botanical studies, I did not know the names of her garden flowers and was completely ignorant as far as certain, obscene-looking scarlet ones were concerned. There was an amused twinkle in her eyes as she spoke of them.

"Evil night thoughts", I told her, "turn into flowers. No name can describe them. Even science does not go beyond a certain point". She laughed, hugging her elbows, flattered by my jesting remark. I thought of it again that evening because some of the said flowers were in the bouquet on the table. I wondered whether Cate would appreciate the joke when she saw them. Perhaps she would, but certainly not in the disguised

way I had expressed it. The evening had revealed one thing but another matter proved that I had been foolish and even blind on that occasion too. Cate was serious-minded and she was her own boss. She had a better grasp of the situation than I had. The free-and-easy, irresponsible atmosphere of the old days was no more use to her. I turned this over in my mind all night long, and my nightmare insomnia exaggerated her mocking attitude. I even found a certain comfort in it. If Cate said that Dino was hers, I would have to leave it at that.

I thought of the matter until dawn broke; and the next day at breakfast time when Elvira returned from mass, she said jokingly, "If you knew what was in the air". She had heard at S. Margherita that the war could not go on much longer because the Pope had made a speech urging all the nations to live peaceably together. You had only got to wish for peace with all your heart and it would be made. No more bombs, no more fires, nor bloodshed. No more vendettas nor hopes of a second Deluge either! Elvira was both anxious and happy. I told her I was going for a walk, and left her busy round the oven.

Although it was Sunday, everybody at *Le Fontane* seemed to have been left over from Saturday evening. I saw Nando, the bombed-out husband, at the window, I saw Fonso's sisters, who were shouting something at him. I greeted the girls. I asked whether Dino had already gone through the woods. They pointed to the meadow behind. I wanted to leave everything to chance and I told Giulia to tell him I had gone to *Le Fontane*. Belbo, fat and excited, was already slipping off into the wood. I called him back and made him lie down on

the path and told him to wait for Dino. He bared his teeth and growled.

Finding myself on the slope with the sound of voices dying away, I imagined the two of them, chasing about among the trees; a grand adventure it would be for them. I wondered if in twenty years' time Dino would still cherish a memory of that hour, the smell of the earth, the far-off voices, skidding down the rock face. I could hear a panting and a rustling and Belbo appeared. He stopped and looked at me. He was alone. I put out my arm and said: "Off you go. Fetch Dino — go on!" He crouched down and flattened his nose on the ground. "Go on!" I stooped down to pick up a stone. Then Belbo leaped up and began to bark at me. I took the stone. Belbo turned and went quietly down the road.

I arrived at the spring in the hollow grown over with wet, lush grass. Patches of sky and airy slopes showed in the gaps between the trees. There was a frothy, almost brackish smell in the cool air. What did the war matter, I thought, what did bloodshed matter with this sky behind the trees? One could dash around, fling oneself down in the grass, play hunting, ambushes. That was how snakes, hares and boys lived. The war would end tomorrow. Everything would be back to what it was before. Peace was coming back with its old pleasures, its old grudges. The cities were breathing again. Only in the woods was there no stir; and where a body had fallen, roots were springing up again.

Dino arrived with his stick, whistling, preceded by Belbo. He declared that Giulia had given him no message but that he had realised that I was waiting for

him. "What have you done to your face?" I asked, and holding him firmly I scrutinised him, touched him — his eyes, eyelids, profile. But can one ever say a child resembles an adult? I had laughed at the notion so often, I was now paying for this. Dino looked round nervously, puffed out his cheeks, sighed heavily. If there was anything about him that at all resembled me it was certainly this exhibition of reluctance. I tried to picture myself pulling that grimace when I was a child. I seemed to remember having had a graceful neck like that in the days when I wandered round the vineyards in the villages.

Then we started off. "This morning we will really go to the top". I told him of the time when I had gathered grapes in the part of the world where I lived. "Everybody, men and boys, have to wash their feet. But the people who normally go barefooted have cleaner feet than we have".

"I go barefoot myself into the fields some days", said Dino.

"You're not much good for picking grapes. You're not strong enough. How old are you exactly?"

He told me. He had been born at the end of August. But was it in October or November that I had left Cate? I could not remember. It had been cold at the station that evening. It was foggy; was it winter? I could not remember. I could only recall playing around with her in the undergrowth by the banks of the Po during the sultry days of August.

Once we had reached the road at the top, we moved more swiftly. It was the suburb of Pino. From there it was possible from the jutting balconies to catch glimpses

of the villas, the plain of Chieri stretching away into a hazy infinity.

"My father used to cover a stretch of this road every day before dawn", I told Dino, "in a trap on his way to the markets".

Dino trotted along beside me without opening his mouth, trailing his stick along the macadamised surface.

"You haven't ever known your father, I suppose?" I said.

"Mummy knew him", he replied. "She says they haven't seen any more of each other".

"Don't you know who he was?"

He looked at me confidently but with impatience. It was evident that he had never given the matter a thought.

"If not, he must be dead", I said. "Isn't your father's name on your school report?"

Dino reflected, staring straight in front of him. "It only mentions mummy", he replied, frowning. "I'm an orphan".

We showed our faces in the doorway of the inn. There was an atmosphere of Sunday in the air. Idlers who were playing billiards looked up at us and made no comment. "It's politics", I whispered to Dino. "Would you like bread and salame?"

Dino ran to the billiard table. I went round it as far as the window at the back. From there one had a view on to the sun-scorched plain. The players, under Dino's scrutiny had begun their game, chatting now. They passed close to him, brandishing their cues.

They were discussing other matters. They were country youths. Some were wearing black shirts.

"Who do you expect it to be?" said a blond, bundled up awkwardly in his clothes. "It's Sunday for everybody, isn't it?"

They laughed cheerfully, too cheerfully, not quite at their ease. I thought of it next day, and it suddenly occurred to me that that sunny Sunday had been the last time when a stranger's arrival had made it necessary to change the subject of conversation at the inn. While that brief summer lasted, at any rate. But none of us knew it then.

Dino was eating his bread at the moment and following the billiard cues round the table. Belbo had found his way in too. It was not easy to get them away. Belbo was panting under the tables. I told Dino that I was going and was leaving him to get drunk. But they both chased after me when I was nearly out of the village.

That afternoon Egle came with her pilot-officer brother, a dark, slim, handsome boy. He held out his hand and bowed at the same time. I came down from my room on hearing their voices and found them in the orchard with my old ladies. The boy was disgruntled and cynical; he had put on his civvies. He spoke of flights over the sea and about seagulls. "Say it, then", he remarked to me. "We airmen are the fools. We are always on the job. Yet we wanted the war less than anyone else".

"You only *fight* it; simple idiots that you are", interrupted his sister.

"When we were your age", I told him, "life was a drawing-room, an antechamber. We thought it a great event if we went out in the evening or hopped on to a train in the country to return to the town. We were

waiting for something that never happened". The boy got my meaning. He said: "And now something has happened".

Then Elvira made us some tea. The old woman inquired cautiously whether now the English had landed there was a danger war might flare up again in Italy.

"From our point of view", said the youth, "we would rather fight in Italy than on the sea or in the desert. At least we know we shall fall in our own country".

"You have clean things and hot food in your quarters, at any rate, I expect", said Elvira. "A cup of tea like this one?"

"I can't make out why they don't want *us* in the war", said Egle. "There are so many things we could do both at the bases and at the front line. Amuse you: help you. Not only as nurses".

Her brother opened his mouth and said, "Yes, it's true".

Then evening came and for some reason or other I remained contemplating the black sky. I thought about the night and the morning that had gone by: the past, so many things. Of my strange immunity in the midst of all this. Of my foolish grievances. Now and then snatches of distant songs and shouts reached my ears. I thought of Dino, the airman, the war. I thought I was old now and would always continue my present way of life.

VII

Next day the news arrived. As soon as it was dawn the radio began bawling it out from the neighbouring houses. Egle called us from the yard. The people went down into the town, talking at the top of their voices. Elvira knocked at my room and called to me through the door that the war was over. Then she came in, and without looking at me because I was getting dressed, told me, red in the face, that Mussolini had been thrown out. I came down and found Egle and her mother. We listened to radio-1 on this time -- I could no longer doubt that the news was true. Her mother said: "But is the war over?"

"No; it's just beginning now", I said cynically.

I now realised what the shouts in the night had meant. Egle's brother had been going off to Turin. They were all hurrying to Turin. Heads popped out of the doors and there was a hum of conversation. It was the beginning of that round of meetings, speeches and gestures -- and incredible hopes, that was destined to end in terror and bloodshed. Everybody's eyes were lit up, even of those people who had other preoccupations. Henceforward even the solitude, even the woods would have a different smell. I felt this from the first glance I gave in the direction of the trees. I would have liked to have known all the details and read the papers so that I might wander off among the tree-trunks and contemplate the new horizon.

With a chorus of cries and shouts Fonso, Nando and

the girls stopped at the gate. "There's plenty happening", cried Nando. "The Fascists are resisting. Come along to Turin with us".

"The war goes on", said Fonso. "Last night we expected you".

"You look as if you are going to have a picnic", I replied. We joked in that way. "Let's go", said the girls.

"Liquidate them. Take the initiative from them", shouted Fonso. "We are needed".

They went off. They said they would be returning at night when peace was signed. I stayed there, not because I was afraid of a few bullets (the danger was less than during an air-raid) but because I anticipated demonstrations, processions, vociferous discussions. Egle wanted me to go as far as another villa with her, where she was going to tell them the news and reports. We passed along by a narrow road between some trees. It took us behind the slope to a small unknown world of river-banks and birds. "They have broken into the prisons". "A state of siege has been declared". "All the Fascists are lying low". Turin seemed remote although it was so near. "Perhaps we'll find some skulking leader in these woods tomorrow", I said.

"Don't frighten us", said Egle.

"Consumed by worms and ants".

"As they deserve to be", said Egle.

"If it hadn't been for them". I replied, "we shouldn't have lived peacefully in the hills for so many years".

We had arrived and she was already calling out to her friend, I said I must run off. She made a wry face.

"Signora Elvira", I interpolated, "does not approve of our going for walks in the woods".

She looked at me narrowly and proffered her hand like a society lady and burst out laughing.

"You are a bad lot", she said.

Her friend came to the window. She was a girl with plaits. I could hear them laughing together in the distance, for by then I was already on the *Le Fontane* road. I noticed that I was alone this time. "Belbo has run off to Turin as well". I imagined the inn silent. Dino in the meadow, the two women in their kitchen. "Now the war is finishing, perhaps Cate will tell me the truth". I thought as I mounted.

I didn't need to go up. Cate was tripping downhill in the sunlight, colourfully dressed.

"How young you look!" I said.

"I'm happy", and she fastened on to my arm without stopping, as if she was dancing with me. "I'm so happy. Aren't you coming to Turin?"

She stopped and said brusquely. "You're quite capable of not knowing anything about what's happened. You were asleep even last night. No one set eyes on you".

"I know the whole story", I said. "I am as happy as you are. But I suppose you know the war's going on? Now the fun will begin".

"Like this?" she asked. "At any rate we can breathe again now. We can *do* something".

We went down the hill arguing. She wouldn't let me talk about Dino. She said that now we must all pull together — protest, strike, make ourselves felt. She said that at least there wouldn't be any more air-raids for a few days and we ought to take advantage of the lull and force the government to make peace. She already knew

what the present government was worth. "They're always the same", she said. "But this time they're afraid, they want to save their skins. We only need give them a little shove".

"And what about the Germans", I said, "and the others?"

"But you've already said we ought to rouse ourselves and make a clean sweep . . .".

"Cate, you're a real hot-head", I broke in. "You've become a real bolshie".

She said I was a fool, and we arrived at the tram stop. I couldn't get her on to the subject of Dino. It seemed odd for us to be talking politics so ardently but on the tram we lowered our voices. The columns in the arcades and walls were plastered with proclamations. People were hanging about. They were strolling to and fro in the festive and bloodless streets in a numbed sort of way. It was the sort of bustling throng you got after a heavy air-raid.

Cate hurried off to the hospital and we parted. She told me that probably she and the boys wouldn't be coming home that night.

"And will Dino be on his own then?"

"Dino has gone on ahead with Fonso and the others. We shall be with them tonight".

I was not too pleased. While we were joking at the gate, Dino had not even spoken to me, not even showed himself. "Where are you having a meal?" asked Cate.

Left on my own, I wandered round Turin. It did indeed seem like the morning of the big fires. Something terrific had happened, an earthquake for which

the old ruins and rubble scattered among the streets and patched up as well as might be provided a suitable setting. . . . It wasn't possible either to think or say anything which did not seem ridiculously inadequate. Some boys went by trundling a torn-down insignia made of tinplate tied to the end of a rope. They set up a hullaballo and the thing rattled like an old kettle. I reflected that Dino was a boy just like these and only yesterday had imagined himself taking part in the war.

In front of the Fascist headquarters stood a cordon of soldiers - part of the 'state of siege' force. They wore steel helmets and carried rifles; they were guarding the street, which was scattered with scraps of burnt paper; the windows were broken, the porch deserted. Passers-by were giving them a wide berth. But the soldiers themselves were bored and were joking together.

I bumped into Egle's brother at a street-corner. He had donned his uniform along with his ribbons and belt and was staring indignantly at the street.

"O Giorgi", I said.

"What is happening ought not to be allowed", he remarked. "This is the end".

"What do they say about it in the army?"

"Nothing. They are just waiting. No one has the courage to come and attack us. They're a pack of cowards".

"Who ought to be attacking you, then?"

Giorgi looked at me, surprised and offended.

"They're all of them running away; they're all scared", he said. "And they've been waiting twenty years to get their own back. I've got into uniform -- the

uniform of the Fascist war -- and not one of them has the courage to come and tear it off me. There's only a few of us. These cowards don't realise that there's so few of us".

Then I said to him that his boss was the King and that the blame lay with the King. All he should do was obey.

He smiled with an air of disgust. "What, you, too! Can't you grasp that we are still only at the beginning? That we've got to defend ourselves?"

He strode away with his mouth shut tight. I followed him with my eyes until he was lost in the crowd. Were there many like him? I wondered if all the Giorgi's, all the fine lads who had been involved in the war, would eye us like that.

"It's lost but it's not over", I muttered to myself. "Some more people will have to die yet". And I looked at their faces and the houses. "Before summer is over, how many of us will be still in this world. How much blood will be splashed on the walls?" I looked at their faces, their dark-ringed eyes as they moved to and fro, their quiet restlessness. "It may be this fair-haired boy's turn next, that tram-conductor's, that woman's, that newspaper vendor's, that dog's".

I finally went off in the direction of the Dora quarter where Fonso's engineering shop was. I strolled along the avenues beyond the bridge. Rising up on my right was the clear and vast hillside. It was a district of large cheap flats and fields and low walls, and as one got more into the country, of small, straggling houses. The sky seemed warmer and more open; the people -- nice-looking women and boys -- thronged the pavements.

the grass and the shops. Slogans had been chalked up on the walls during the night, inspired by this mood of rash enthusiasm.

From Fonso's shop which lay behind an iron gate and a large shed at the back of the meadow came the whir and thud of machinery. So work was going on. Nothing was really changed. The day passed peacefully in those streets which had seen so much suffering and hope, where in our boyhood's days so much blood had been shed. The workmen, the down-trodden, worked as they had been working the day before. Perhaps they thought it was all over.

As I waited I thought of Cate, of the logical pattern of her life revolving and catching me at that particular moment. I thought of the violent yet cynical enthusiasm which I had shared with Gallo for the tough humanity of the suburbs, of the useless rage when I had plunged into Anna Maria's room; all that was left of it was my shame, my secret blushes. The whole episode had been so futile that I was reduced to saying to myself, "Good. You're well out of it".

But was I in fact really so? There was the end of the war, there was the problem of Dino. Threatening though the immediate outlook was, the old world was rocking and it was on that and the terror and bitterness that such a world inspired that my life was founded. I was now forty years old and there was Cate and there was Dino. It did not matter really whose son he was; what mattered was the fact that we had come together that summer after the unfortunate incidents of the past and that Cate had an object in life, the will to rouse herself, and a full existence of her own. Was I not being

futile and even wicked once more, hanging around her life, half lost, half humiliated?

There were signs of activity in the engineering shop. Like me, other people were waiting about and standing in small groups; some of them were coming away, fit-looking men, girls, youths with their jackets slung over their shoulders. They were beginning to call out to each other and chatter loudly. I recognised the men I knew. Here the sly suspicion which reigned in the city in the midst of the chaos and the rejoicings was submerged in a very different kind of frankness, an ingenuous and ardent clamour. Even the isolated individuals who glanced at you and then went off whistling had a jauntiness in their gait. Loudest-voiced of all were the girls. They called out to each other and exchanged items of news; shouted exuberantly things which would not have been allowed the day before.

It was terribly hot. I noticed Fonso standing with a group. I stood still. He really was just a boy. Next to him was a huge man in overalls and another, very short. They were joking together. I hoped that Cate or one of the others had come to the gate, but I did not see any of them.

"The professor", shouted Fonso.

I went in with them. They were discussing the newspaper report. "The *cavaliere* Mussolini", burst out the little man scathingly, chewing his cigarette. "The *cavaliere* . . . Have you got it? Ah! Now they remember".

"They're scared of the Germans", said Fonso.

"Rot. We're a lot of fools", sneered the other. "You know how it is. They've come to the conclusion among the high-ups that the story was beginning to stink, so

they trot along to the King and say: 'Listen. You must pension us off and raise us out of the mud. Meantime, you carry on the war; the Italians are breaking out, putting their necks in the noose. Tomorrow we will come back and lend you a hand. Agreed?' ”.

“Let him jibber away”, roared the huge man in overalls. “If he can’t make a fool of himself today, when can he? Last night you must have been drunk”.

“Four of them were”, said Fonso, amused.

“Well, that’s plenty. Let’s go home”.

“They’ll be coming back. You’ll see”, shouted the little man.

I stayed alone with Fonso and the giant. We walked about among the gesticulating and excited crowd.

“Aurelio is right, though”, said Fonso. “They have filled the barracks with soldiers”.

The giant turned his head, inquisitively. “The soldiers are people, aren’t they?” he said. “Armed people. You can’t say who they will fire on . . .”.

“They’re afraid of the Germans”, I interrupted. “They will fire on the Germans”.

“One thing at a time”, said the other quietly. “Their moment will come. But it’s not yet”.

“Rot”, said Fonso. “Let them shoot at once. We’re fighting a war”.

The giant shook his head.

“You don’t know what politics are”, he said. “Leave it to the old ’uns”.

“We did — once before”, said Fonso.

The wirelasses were beginning to crackle as we arrived in front of the house. We hung around for a while; they stopped. “Hush, the news bulletin”. One

after the other came the items about the 'state of siege', 'everything under control' throughout Italy, cheering processions, our decision to fight and honour ourselves 'to the last drop of blood'.

"Leave it to those who know how", repeated the giant, bowing his head.

"It's all a lot of bunkum", said Fonso. "Long live Aurelio".

Behind the house, the hill, dotted with houses and woods, rose into the sky. I wondered which among the people who were waiting, going home again, chattering among themselves, were looking at it at that precise moment. In that region, oddly enough, the houses were still intact. I asked Fonso if he was going up there that night.

"There's things to be done in Turin", he said to me. "We'll have to keep our eyes skinned down there".

The giant nodded approval.

"And where are the womenfolk?" I asked. "Has Cate remained at the hospital?"

"You stay with us tonight", said Fonso. "We'll all go along to the meeting".

"What meeting?"

Fonso grinned like a boy. "A meeting in the square, or a secret meeting. All depends. With the present government, you never know where you are. Previously the ship was at least afloat".

I persuaded them to tell me where I could find them. I shook the giant's huge hand. I went off under the blazing sun and ate a meal at a café in the town centre, where people were talking as if nothing had happened. One thing was certain — the enemy radio stations had

announced it too — there would be no more bombs dropping from the sky for a few days. I called at school but no one was there. Then I wandered off alone down the street and past the cafés, idly flicked over the pages of a few books in a bookshop and hung about in front of old houses which held ever-vivid memories for me. Everything seemed as if it had been refreshed, liberated; it was beautiful, like the sky after a storm. I knew it could not last and slowly I made my way to the hospital where Cate worked.

VIII

That night I went back to the hills arm in arm with Cate, and Dino trotted sleepily in front of me. We had eaten supper together on the fourth floor of Fonso's flat in the company of his sisters and some neighbours; we had laughed, listened to the wireless, straining our ears for the sound of any trouble or street processions. The summer evening, hot with scents and hope, went to my head. Then we all descended to a paved courtyard — in the shade where people were gathering — workers, fellow-lodgers and girls; there was one man, a mere youth, who stepped out on to the balcony of the entresol and spoke heatedly and far from ingenuously of the great event of that day and of what was to come. I was carried away. These people have been affected neither by propaganda nor terror, I thought. Man is not so bad. Then other people spoke and argued loudly. The giant of before appeared. He urged caution. They overwhelmed him with applause. "He's been to prison", they said, turning to me. "He's been responsible for strikes . . .". "Let the government produce an explanation", they called out. "Let our people have their say". A female voice started a song. They all joined in. I thought the military patrols would hear us from the road and I posted myself under the porch of the guard-room.

Now Cate and I were mounting the slope in silence, arm in arm like lovers, and between us walked a hope, a summer apprehension. Twice that day we had strolled

through Turin together and before supper on the open space by the Po, in front of the hospital, I remembered that it had been just there that I had first got to know Cate and we had started off on our river expeditions. The day was coming to an end in a fragrant coolness, the clear air, the brightness of everything evoked memories of other evenings, innocent evenings of peace. Everything seemed resolved, full of promise, forgivable. I had discussed Gallo again with Cate; his melancholy voice; our friends of those days. The sparkling freshness of the world that evening put an end to callousness, rancour, inhibitions. We had little to be ashamed of. We could talk freely.

Cate laughed, pretending not to believe in my infatuation for Anna Maria. "She must be a sly boots", she said. "One of those who know how to get men chasing after them. Why didn't you get married?"

"She wouldn't have me".

She frowned. "Is it *you* who wouldn't have *her*", she replied. "You conveyed that impression to her. Why shouldn't she have married you?"

"I was too mad. I wanted to marry her as a means of escaping from her hands. It was the only way".

"Look here. It's you that's the trouble. You are not capable of love".

"Cate", I said, "Anna Maria was rich and spoilt. You can't trust these women who take baths every day. They have a different blood in their veins. Their amusements are different from ours. They are worse than the Fascists. It's the Fascists who raised them to their present exalted position".

"You seem to know all about it", smiled Cate.

"If Anna Maria had a son and had called him Corrado, I would clear out".

Cate was silent, still happy though she was frowning.

"Tell me, Cate, are you sure that Dino . . .".

We were alone among the houses, waiting for the tram. Once again along the same via Nizza there was nothing but the isolated groups of demolished houses, like great holes in someone's gums. I took her hand.

"No", she said to me. "It's no use pretending. We aren't the same as we were before. What does it matter to you whether Dino is your son or not? If he were your son, you would want to marry me. But we can't get married just for that reason. And you want to marry me to work something off. You mustn't think of it". She put her hand to my coat lapel, caressing me, and looked at me, smiling. "I've told you before. Don't worry. He's not your son. Now, are you satisfied?"

"I don't believe it, Cate", I murmured as she stroked me. "What would you do if you were in my place?"

"Let things go their way", she said cheerfully. "Who could possibly want to have a son in these times?"

"Idiot".

Cate blushed and squeezed my arm.

"No, you're right. I would tear your eyes out. I would create havoc. But I am his mother, Corrado".

We were ascending the hill in the dark at that point. Dino was stumbling along beside us, half-asleep. I turned over in my mind our previous pleasant conversations as I walked along with Cate, my heart full of anxious hope. Hope for what, I wondered. I did not know exactly, but for some time now I had come to rely on her kindness, the firm way in which she

handled me, the tacit promise not to bear me any ill-will. I found it impossible to get angry. She treated me as though we were married.

We chatted in a whisper so that Dino could not hear us. But he was staggering along half asleep, breathing deeply as though he were dreaming. I supported his head with my hand. I had the curious sensation of having myself as a boy under my own fingers—the same short hair, the head hung forward. Did Cate realise what feelings were going through me?

“Who can say whether Dino resembles his father or not”, I said. “He likes to wander in the woods; he likes being left to his own devices, I bet that when you kiss him he wipes his face. Do you kiss him sometimes?”

“He’s a mule, just an obstinate mule”, said Cate. “He grabs everything. At school he’s always scrapping with everybody. But he’s not a bad boy”.

“Does he like his school work?”

“So long as I can help him”, said Cate. “I am so glad he’ll have a different programme of study next year. He’s been studying and learning things that he ought not to have been doing”.

She said this in a grumbling tone. I could not help laughing.

“Don’t worry”, I said. “All boys want to fight in a war”.

“But it’s wonderful”, said Cate. “What has happened? It is as if his life had just begun today and he was being cured”.

We were silent for a while, each occupied with our own thoughts. Dino grunted; murmured something. I took his hand, drew him to my side.

"When another year is over what further schooling will he be having?"

"I want him to study as long as possible", said Cate, "so he can become something worthwhile".

"But will he want to?"

"When you were giving him a lesson on flowers, he was happy enough", said Cate. "He likes learning".

"Don't be too sure. Boys find the same sort of interest in these matters as they do in war".

She looked at me, surprised.

"Take me", I said to her. "Even I studied science when I was a boy. Yet I have never become anybody".

"You've got your degree, haven't you. You're a qualified teacher. I wish I knew all the things you know".

"But that's quite different from being somebody", I said quietly. "People haven't any idea. It needs a combination of good luck, courage and tenacity. Especially courage. Courage to stand alone as if the other people weren't there, and to remain single-minded. Not to be shocked by indifference. You have to wait for years; you have to die. Then after you are dead — if you're lucky — you may become someone".

"You're always the same", whispered Cate. "Making things out to be impossible so as not to have to accomplish them. All I want is for Dino to have a good job in life so that he won't need to work like a dog and curse me".

"If you really are pinning your hopes in the revolution", I said. "You should be content to have a working-class child".

Cate was offended and sulked. Then she said to me,

“I would like him to study and follow in your footsteps, Corrado. And to be not unmindful of people like ourselves, less fortunate than himself”.

Elvira was waiting for me at the gate that night. She did not ask me whether I had already had supper. She treated me coldly in the way we treat a heedless person who has got himself into danger and caused us to worry. She did not ask me what I had been doing at Turin. She said that they had always treated me well and thought they had a claim to some consideration on my part in return. I was free to go with anyone I liked, but at least I ought to let them know.

“By what right?” I replied brusquely. “No one has any rights over us. We have the right to curl up and die and take the consequences if we want”.

Elvira looked past me over my shoulders into the darkness. She was silent. I was shocked to see that her cheeks were covered with tears.

Then I lost all patience. **“We are in the world by chance”, I said. “Father, mother and children, all by chance. It’s no use having any regrets. We are born and die alone . . .”.**

“But we just want a little love”, she murmured in her authoritative tone.

IX

I did not go down into Turin for several days: I contented myself with newspapers and the new liberty of being able to listen and criticise. On all sides people were indulging in gossip, expressing opinions. The one thought that did not occur to anyone in the houses was that the old world had not been crushed by its enemies but had killed itself. But does anyone ever commit suicide merely to disappear?

Elvira was already calmed down by the next day; she knew me only too well. But she blushed when she saw me. Her mother tried to make fun of us but I replied somewhat drily, and Elvira froze up like a widow in mourning. Then she gazed at me in her best faithful dog, patient sister, martyred victim manner. Poor thing; there was no pretence about it; she was really suffering. But what was to be done? Express regret for having joked with her about the flowers — for that was the source of her perturbation and embarrassment.

While she was wandering about the house in the evening, I endeavoured to get all the possible radio stations. It was now evident that the war was going on — but without any purpose. The air-warfare truce was over already; the allies announced further raids. I opened a door and found Elvira, who called out the latest war news to me. This was her favourite subterfuge for engaging me in conversation; at this rate the war could go on for ever as far as she was concerned

but it dawned on her that day, even as I was announcing changes to come, that I was eluding her.

My escape in the daytime was *Le Fontane* — Cate and Dino. I did not need to present myself in the courtyard; I had only to wander along the accustomed paths to discover whether Dino was there or not. Sometimes I managed to induce Belbo to lie down, and, hidden from view myself, I spied over the hedge. There was the old man, the host, rinsing out the large demi-johns, the stub-end of a cigar between his teeth. He was short and thick-set. He kept going in and out of the cellar, pausing to collect a nail, study the iron railing preparatory to refixing a vine-trailer on the low wall. Seeing him one could not believe there was a war on or that anything else mattered besides the nail, the wall and the tilling of the soil. He was called Gregorio. Cate's grandmother, on the other hand, often raised her voice, as raucous as a magpie's, during the afternoon, grumbling away at Dino, her neighbours and the world in general. At that time when Fonso and Nando and the girls were spending the nights at Turin, it was the only sign of life at *Le Fontane*, even during the evenings when Cate arrived. It looked like some derelict spot where life had ceased, like a part of the forest. And as in the case of a forest all you could do was to go and sniff around it; you could not live there and get to know it properly.

When I inquired of Dino whether he still drew, he shrugged his shoulders and shortly afterwards brought me his sketchbook. Then we talked about birds, grasshoppers and geological strata. Why, I wondered, shouldn't I go around with him as I used to when I didn't even dream of all these possibilities? Dino

accepted my company now without much enthusiasm; no doubt I was too much at his elbows, too much *in loco parentis*. It was an odd thing, I reflected, but children are no different from adults; they get fed up with too much attention. Love is a thing that dries up. But could Elvira's infatuation for me, my chats with Dino — acting like a boy myself for his benefit — could these be described as love? Are there in fact forms of love which are not purely selfish, not bent on trying to force a man or a woman into their own scheme of things? Cate allowed me to replace her as far as Dino was concerned, to do what I liked, and we were free to wander in the woods at will. In the evening when we arrived back she would give us an inscrutable, mocking glance as she quietly waited to listen to Dino's boasts. Sometimes I thought that she too found this arrangement suited her convenience.

One thing that excited Dino in particular were pre-historic monsters and the lives of savages. I brought some more illustrated books, and we played at imagining to ourselves that the hollow on the pathway to Pino, overgrown with moss and bracken, and all among the horse-tails was the lair of megatheria and mammoths. He had a predilection for pseudo-scientific stories, stories concerned with infernal machines and space-men; he read them in his weekly papers. In the playground at Turin one of his school friends, Cruscotto, was always to be found. He spent his time in the cellar cutting up aluminium and tin-plate, tying bits of wire together and rigging up a complete underground system for the defence of the buildings. There were just a few chosen spirits. They talked about Gordon, Yellow Men,

Dr. Misteriosus. At the period of the first air-raid warnings, they had carried out experiments and held councils of war. With them was Sybil, the 'leopard girl', but her part was played by several girls and they did not need to have them down in the cellar with them — the enemy would run off with Sybil and she then had to be liberated. Dino told about these things in Cate's and the old grandmother's presence. He got excited, imitated the voices of various characters and the firing of shots, ragging it all and especially the scenes in which Sybil took a part. I knew why.

When the two of us went walking together it was different. Dino did not mention Sybil then. The reason was clear — there's always something almost immodest about two men discussing a girl. I had felt the same about it once. We penetrated into the wood, surveying the terrain. Where Dino saw tribes, pursuits, the hurling of javelins, I saw glades, slopes, the intricate entanglements of bindweed over a canefield. But one thing we had in common was that all notion of woman and the burning mystery of sex was out of place within the confines of the woods, and was merely a disturbing element. I, whom the ravines, roots, and slopes reminded of bloodshed and the savagery of life, found it impossible to associate them with something no less elemental and savage, a woman in her prime. But I never got beyond Elvira's red flowers, the ones that had amused me so much. Dino was laughing just then, too — why? — was it about women, Sybil? He turned to me awkwardly, shrugging his shoulders, as if on the defensive. How much did he know? In the matter of instincts and experiences we were the same. I was

pleased about the tacit understanding which existed between us.

The alerts and invasions of aeroplanes soon began again. The first storms arrived and from a sky washed clean the August moon lit up everything, even the mouths of the gutters in the streets. Fonso and the rest of the boys reappeared. "These fools of Englishmen", they said, "don't they realise that an invasion is enough to undo a month's clandestine activities? When our house is on fire, the time has come for us too to clear out".

"They know that well enough. They don't appreciate our efforts", said Nando. "They all agree on that point".

The giant in the overalls was also one of our company that evening. His name was Tono. "War is always war", he said, shaking his head.

"You make me laugh", I retorted. "We are a battlefield. If the English have demolished the headquarters of Fascism, it has not been with the idea of transforming it into a villa to present it to us. They don't want encumbrances on the battlefield—it's as simple as that".

"But we happen to be on it", said Fonso. "And it's not very easy to get rid of us".

"Not easy? They've only got to set alight to the stubble-fields. They're doing it now".

"War is moles' work. All you've got to do is burrow underground", remarked Nando.

"Do so then", I shouted. "Hide yourself and put a stop to it all. But while there's a German still left in Italy, it's useless to think of it".

Giulia — or another girl, I could not be sure — said, “The professor’s mad”.

Cate interrupted, “But who’s asking you to move?”

All eyes were turned in my direction. Even Dino’s.

I was for ever vowing I would keep silent and listen, just listen and shake my head. The truth was that the period of nervously weighing up fears, anticipations and futile hopes was suited to my mood. I would have liked it to have gone on for ever. The impatience of the others might destroy it. For some time I had become accustomed to inaction, to letting the world pursue its own mad course. But a gesture on the part of Fonso and his friends was enough to jeopardise everything. That was why I got worked up and argumentative.

“Ever since the fall of Fascism”, I remarked, “you appear to have stopped singing. Why is that?”

“Cheer up — we do”, said the girls in chorus. They began to sing some of the old songs; Dino struck up ‘The Red Flag’. We all sang a verse, laughing nervously; but then arguments started up again. Tono, the giant, said, “We’ll have our hands full when the elections begin”.

It was on one of those evenings, while we were waiting for the all-clear in the courtyard that Cate’s old woman voiced her opinion. I had just been saying to Fonso, “If the Italians are going to take things seriously, they’ll have to have bombs”. The old woman chipped in, “Go and tell that to the men who have to work. War’s a picnic to the people who have plenty to eat and can escape to the hills. It’s folk like you who have landed us in this war”. She said it quite calmly without a hint of bitterness, as if I were her son.

I did not react at once. "Would they were all like him!" said Cate. I still did not reply. "Damn it, you've got to look after your own skin!" Fonso arrived at that point.

"Even we ourselves, mamma", said Cate, "come to spend the night in the hills".

The old woman was muttering away. I wondered vaguely if she knew how deeply her shaft had gone home. The excuses the others advanced for me did not count. There was a sense in which they too had made me feel debased.

Tono, who was a socialist, said, "They're all busy trying to save their own skins. We're fighting because every man jack of us, including our bosses and even our enemies, knows where his safety lies. That's why socialism wants to put an end to wars".

Fonso burst in, "Just a moment. You don't say why it's up to the working classes to defend themselves. The bosses use war and terror as a means of maintaining themselves in power. They go forward over our dead bodies. And you kid yourselves that they are understanding. They understand very well! That's why they go on".

"I don't mean that", I intervened, "I'm not talking about social classes. But Fonso is right, of course. We Italians are made like that — it takes force to make us obey. Then, with the excuse that it was force, we laugh at it. Nobody takes it seriously".

"Certainly not the civilian population".

"I mean all Italians".

"Professor", exclaimed Nando, lowering his head. "Do you love Italy?"

Once more they all fixed their gaze on me. I was the centre of all their eyes — Tono, the old woman, Cate. Fonso smiled.

“No”, I said quietly, “not Italy. The Italians”.

“Shake on it”, said Nando. “We understand each other”.

X

Some nights later Turin was in flames. It lasted more than an hour. It felt as if the engines and explosions were directly over our heads. Bombs landed in the hills too and in the Po. One plane made a savage machine-gun attack on an anti-aircraft battery — we learned next day that several Germans had been killed. "We are in the hands of the Germans", they all said. "They are undertaking our defence".

The following evening there were further raids and on a larger scale. We could feel the houses crumbling and the earth quivering. People took to flight and began sleeping in the woods again. My womenfolk knelt on a mat and prayed until dawn. I went down to Turin the next day where the fires had been; people were clamouring for peace and the cessation of hostilities on all sides. The newspapers were insulting each other. It went round that the Fascists were raising their heads again, that German divisions were pouring into the Veneto and that our soldiers had orders to fire into the crowd. Political prisoners were being released from prisons and concentration camps.

The Pope made another speech calling on the people in the name of Christian charity.

We had one night free of disturbance while we waited tense and anxious (it was Milan's turn that time), then a second night of fire and explosions. The enemy radios issued the following warning every evening: "This attack will be repeated every night until the end.

Capitulate". All the talk now in the cafés and streets was as to how it could be done. The whole of Sicily was occupied. "Let us treat with them", said the surviving Fascists. "But the enemy must first remove themselves from our soil". Others cursed the Germans. Everybody was waiting for a coastal landing below Rome and Genoa.

On my way back to the hill, I felt how precarious my shelter there was. The woods were filled with an expectant silence. Even the sky was empty. I would like to have been a root, a worm, and gone underground. A gloomy Elvira, with that voice of hers and dark circles round her eyes, was getting on my nerves; I could understand Cate's hardening up and her feeling that she did not want to hear any more about those things. It was not the season for love-affairs, indeed it never had been as far as we were concerned. All the years we had gone through had taken us no further than our present dilemma. Each of us in his own way — Gallo, Fonso, Cate — had been living for this hour, without knowing it, preparing for just his fate. The people who, like Elvira, had allowed themselves to be taken unprepared irritated me. I preferred Gregorio; at least he was old, like the soil, like the trees I preferred Dino, the dark seed of an uncertain future.

Egle gave me the news that her brother had rejoined the forces. That too seemed a fitting destiny. What else could the boy do? There were plenty like him who were caught up in the war without believing in it — war was everywhere around them, and no one had trained him for anything else. Giorgi was a taciturn man. He had been content to say, "My duty is up there", and join in

the battle again. He made no protest; he did not even try to understand.

The protest came from his family, who did not understand. I learned this from Egle, who used to pass by the gate every morning on her way to collect the milk, eggs and the day's gossip. She stopped to chat with the old woman or with Elvira, and in her tone of voice and her confidences I detected as it were an echo of the Giorgi drawing room, the superior people, her father's office, of the industrialist and man-of-property. How was the war going? Worse than ever. What had the Fascists been doing to let themselves be overthrown? Theirs had been an act of noble generosity, a sacrifice to restore peace to the country. And what had been the country's response? Strikes, treachery and sabotage. Let them go on. That was what some people thought. Everything would be set to rights before many thought possible.

Elvira's mother would mumble remarks of this kind and it was the line taken by Egle, who saw everybody and knew everything about everybody. "We", she would begin and this 'we' embraced her father, the drawing-room, the villa — "*we* have suffered more from the war than anybody. Our Turin house is demolished; the porter killed. We have to live here. My brother has gone back to fight. For two years he has been risking his life in the war. What have these subversive people got against us?"

"What subversive people?"

"The whole lot of them. Those who do not yet understand why we are at war. The hooligans. You know them".

She directed this remark at me and leaned back her head in characteristic fashion.

"I don't know any hooligans", I cut in. "I only know some hard workers".

"There he is getting worked up", she looked at me, amused. "We know you go along to the inn, and whom you find there . . .".

"Foolish talk". I broke in. "And who would these hooligans be?"

Egle did not reply. She lowered her eyes in a superior way.

"The only hooligans", I replied, "are those who have landed us in this war and still count on our loyalty".

Egle darted black looks at me, breathing hard. She looked like a guilty school-girl caught red-handed and in a temper.

"Your brother does not come into the question", I said. "Your brother is a deluded man, paying for the others. But at least he's got courage, which is more than the others have". "A lot of courage you've got", said Egle, furious.

We parted on that note. But the story of the inn was only just beginning. One day when I went into the kitchen and Elvira was whipping up some cream (the kitchen was her province and she was trying to seduce me with sweet things, though her mother took a poor view of the waste involved), I said to her, "No starvation here".

She lifted her head. "They can't lay hands on anything — no eggs, no butter; not even blackmarket. The people who used to live on nothing but boiled potatoes are buying everything up".

"I hope they'll keep on", I retorted.

Elvira went up to the oven, frowning. She turned her back on me.

"It's all bought up by the inns where you spend the nights having a good time".

"And sleeping on the ground", I added.

"I'm not interested", snorted Elvira, turning round.

"But they're not our sort of people".

"You're right there", I said. "They're much better than us". She put her hand to her throat, her eyes blazing with indignation.

"If you're thinking about women and wine, ask Belbo", I replied. "He sees eye to eye with me about these people. There is no one like a dog for judging one's neighbour".

"But they are . . .".

"Subversive elements, I know. So much the better. Do you think the world is made up of priests and Fascists?"

I cannot remember now why I said those things. All I know is that Cate was quite justified in calling me bad, stuck-up and a coward. She had also said that I was only good in spite of myself. I cannot say whether that is true. But I said different things to different people: I was always trying to seem other than what I was and I felt the constraining hand of time upon me; I felt that everything was futile, vain, already atoned for. There had been a sudden alert at midday the morning I had been bickering with Elvira. The hill, the valley, Turin in the distance, all was silent under the sky. I was at peace in the orchard. I asked myself how many hearts were ceasing to beat at that moment, how many leaves

were rustling in the wind, how many dogs were lying flat on the ground. Yet the earth, the hill and the hill's edge would vibrate with life again, and I suddenly realised how stupid and futile the contentment I had felt in the woods was, my pride in the woods that continued even when I was with Dino. It struck me under that summer sky filled with hideous noises that I had always played around like an irresponsible boy. As far as Cate was concerned, was I anything more than a child like Dino? In what relation did I stand to Fonso, to the others, even to myself?

I waited a while, trembling and anxious for the throb of the aeroplane engines. The anguish of those days, intolerable at that hour, could only be dispelled by some greater, irreparable catastrophe. But was not that my usual game that had become a habit by now? I thought of Cate, Fonso, Nando, of the Turin war victims who were crammed together in their shelters as in so many catacombs, waiting. Some joked, some were laughing. "It's a long drawn-out business", they said.

Bloodshed and ferocity, life underground, the woods -- were not those things all part of the game too? Weren't they like savages, like Dino's juvenile periodicals? If Cate were to die, I thought, who would give a thought to her son? Who would ever know whether he was her son or mine?"

The squeaking of a pump startled me. Elvira emerged and said, "The meal's on the table".

The wireless had closed down when the alert sounded and we sat down at the table in silence, Elvira presiding, and the old mother at the side, as usual. The old lady crossed herself. No one said a word. The act

of unfolding my napkin, picking up a knife and fork and eating seemed like some stupid game. About one o'clock the all-clear sounded. It made us jump with surprise. Elvira put another slice of tart on to my plate.

XI

Summer was drawing to a close. Peasants began to be seen in the fields, and ladders to be erected against the trunks of fruit trees. Like Dino, I did not leave the meadow; there were the pears, grapes, there was the field of dhurra grass. News arrived of the landing in Calabria; nights were given up to obstinate discussions. The important, fateful event was taking place. Then why was nobody doing anything? Were we to end like that?

The 8th of September caught us by surprise when we were stripping the walnut trees with Gregorio. First a military car flew past us along the street, blowing its hooter at the corners, and raising a cloud of dust. It came from Turin. Shortly afterwards, the same din from a second car. Five went by in all. The dust was blown in the limpid evening air as far as the trees. We stared at each other. Dino ran into the courtyard. At dusk we were joined by Cate. "Don't you know?" she called out from the street. "Italy has asked for an armistice today".

The harsh, monotonous, incredible voice on the radio repeated the news mechanically, every five minutes. It stopped and started up again each time with an outburst of threats. It never varied, never wavered, never added anything. It had the obstinacy of an old man or a child who has learned his piece.

None of us said anything at first, except Dino, who clapped his hands. We were as disconcerted as we had

been when the five motor vehicles had torn past us earlier on.

Cate told us that the loudspeakers were still blaring the news from Radio-London in the cafés and streets of Turin and large groups of people were cheering. There had been a landing in Salerno. There was fighting everywhere. "If at Salerno why not at Genoa?" There were processions and demonstrations.

"I can't make out what the Germans are up to", said Cate. "Do they intend to get out or not?"

"Not a hope", I said. "They couldn't, even if they wanted to".

"It's our boys' turn", said the old woman. "It's their turn now".

Old Gregorio made no comment but he did not take his eyes off me. He, too, looked like a stupefied child. The comic idea flashed through my head that even the old marshal who was throwing us all into confusion, that even he and his generals would know no more about the business than Gregorio, and would have their ears glued to their radio sets like him and I.

"But what about Rome?" I said. "What's going on in Rome?"

No radio station was telling us that. Cate had heard in the town that the English had occupied it and we only needed a thousand parachute troops to join ours and they could tackle the Germans. "They must be fools, these ministers, but they cling to their own skins all right. They will have foreseen all this — you can bet your boots on that", said Cate.

"What about Nando and Fonso", I inquired suddenly. "Aren't they coming? This is the news

they've been waiting for. They will be overjoyed".

"I haven't seen them", said Cate. "I dashed off to tell you the latest".

Nando and Fonso did not come that evening. Giulia arrived breathless. She said that there had been a meeting in the factory for the purpose of collecting weapons together, that Fonso had made a speech, that there was talk of occupying the barracks. Shots had been heard in the outskirts. It was known that gangs of thieves had looted a military store, that Germans were selling their uniforms to Fascists and escaping in disguise.

"I'm returning to Turin", said Giulia. "Au revoir".

"Tell the rest of them to come up here", shouted the old woman. "Tell Fonso and the other fools. There are some tough days ahead".

"It's nothing", said Cate, excited. "This time it is really over. It only means putting up resistance for a few more days".

"There won't be any more invasions", I said sharply.

When I was on the point of going off for supper, Dino made us all laugh. "Is the war over?" he piped up.

Next day I was up and about at dawn. Still no news from Rome. Our wireless was broadcasting a song programme. The usual war bulletins were coming from abroad. The landing at Salerno, for example; reference to the surface of the water swarming with transport vessels; the operation was still being carried out. Elvira stood listening next to me, tense and pale. We formed a little cluster round the wireless. I suddenly said, "I've no idea when I'll be back", and left them.

To occupy the empty morning, I started off on the Turin road. I came across some stray pedestrians and a

cyclist who was panting up the slope. Turin was peacefully veiled in a haze of smoke among the distant hills. Where was the war? The nights when there had been all the fires seemed so remote, so incredible now. I strained my ears and could hear motor-lorries.

The Turin papers published the capitulation in huge headlines. But the inhabitants seemed preoccupied with their own affairs. The shops were open; civic guards at the cross-roads; trams running. No one spoke about peace. At the corner by the station a group of unarmed Germans were loading up furniture, casual bystanders were lending a hand with the removal. "I can't see any of our men. They are all confined to barracks because of the 'state of siege' ", I thought.

I kept my ears open and peered into the eyes of the passers-by. They walked along taciturn, with the air of keeping out of the way. Perhaps the previous day's news has been denied, I thought, and nobody wants to admit having believed it. But two youths under the entrance of the Cristallo Cinema were shouting in the midst of a bunch of people and setting fire to an unfolded newspaper which a waiter was trying to snatch back. Some were laughing.

"They're Fascists", said another who was standing unperturbed at the corner.

"Fight them, kill them", howled a woman.

I finally learned the news at the entrance to the bar. The Germans were occupying the towns. Acqui, Alessandria, Casale were already in their hands. "Who said so?" "Travellers on their arrival".

"If it were true, the trains wouldn't still be leaving", I said.

"You don't know the Germans".

"And what's happening in Turin?"

"They will come", said another, laughing, **"in their own good time. They do everything methodically. They cannot stand useless disorder. They carry out massacres with calm deliberation".**

"But isn't anyone resisting?" I asked.

The cries and hubbub under the portico grew louder. We went outside. One of the two youths was standing on a table, haranguing the people, some of whom were listening and jeering, others were turning away. Two others were fighting against a pillar, and a woman, shrieking at the top of her voice, was attempting to intervene. **"The government of shame, of treachery and disaffection",** cried the orator, **"begs you to complete the work of assassinating your own land".** The table shook under him; invectives arose from the crowd.

"Sold to the Germans", they shouted.

There were old men, maid-servants, boys and a soldier among them. I thought of Tono and what he would have to say. I shouted some remark at the speaker and just then the crowd surged and then broke up. Somebody called out: **"Make way or I'll shoot".** Two shots rang out, reverberating under the arcade; the people fell flat on the ground and then made off; panes of glass were shattered into smithereens and far away in the middle of the piazza, I could still see the same two fighting and the woman trying to separate them.

With the two shots still echoing in my head, I moved away in order to avoid being taken by surprise and now realised why the people were silent and were keeping clear. I went off to my school in the quiet and deserted

street. I hoped to find someone there; I saw notices up. We'll be having the exams within a month, I thought. Old Domenico put his head out. "What's the news, professor? Are you bringing us peace?" "Peace is a bird. It has been and flown off again". Domenico shook his head. He brought his fist down on the newspaper. "You can't just dismiss it with a phrase", he said. He had not heard any remarks about the Germans. "They know how to go about it", he said suddenly. "They know. But what a business it was about your colleague!" He bent forward and lowered his voice. "Have you heard what they say? That he ought to come back".

I went away with a new worry gnawing at me. There was an understanding between myself and Cate that she should get down from the tram every day and look round to see if I had happened to get off at Turin. I stationed myself at the corner and waited. The appointed time went by and she did not appear. In the meantime I heard other talk which confirmed the report that the Germans were occupying central points and disarming our people. "But are our men still putting up resistance?" Nobody seemed to know. There had been a battle at Novi. "They are now at Settimo, of course. A whole armoured division is advancing".

"But what's happening at our Headquarters?"

A wireless started up in a café close by and after a deal of preliminary crackling it burst into some jazz song. We formed a circle. "Switch it on to London", they called out. London was broadcasting in French; then followed further exasperating crackling. An excited Italian voice from Tunis read out a news bulletin. The

news was still the same — the Russian advance, the landing at Salerno; the operation was still in progress. "What news from Radio Rome", we all shouted. "What's happening at home — on the home front? You cowards".

"The Fascists are in Rome", screamed a voice.

"Cowards; we're sold".

I was conscious of someone seizing hold of my arm. It was Cate. She was smiling her old smile. We left the group.

"You remembered, then?" I said.

We crossed the piazza. Cate spoke in a whisper and smiled ruefully.

"The situation is fantastic", she said. "It's the most significant day of the war. The government is not there. We are in the hands of the Germans. We must resist".

We hurried on beyond the Dora suburb. "What do you think we can do?" I asked her. "It's only a matter of days. It's in the interests of the English to get a move on. More than in ours".

"Have you heard the German radio?" asked Cate. "They are broadcasting Fascist songs".

We arrived in the assembly courtyard. It seemed like yesterday but more than a month had gone by. There was no one there. Cate chatted to her neighbours from the balcony.

Finally Giulia and Nando's wife arrived. "Haven't they come back?" Nando's wife leaned up against the door. "Don't worry", they said to her. "Would you expect a man to return home to do anything today? It was rather worse in Albania".

"They are only boys, they're crazy", she exclaimed.

We turned the radio on again. No news.

"If they get themselves arrested", moaned his wife, "they'll be in German hands".

"Rot. They've not taken them yet", shouted Cate.

They then informed me that a patrol had broken up a meeting during the night and that Tono had been arrested. "They've been trying to set him free", said Giulia. "You'll see".

Cate had to go back to the hospital. We ate something, sitting on the bed.

"I'm coming too", I said to her. Nando's wife did not eat a bite. She paced up and down in the room. And she's the one who seemed the most courageous, I thought. The present is no time for getting married. Better to be like Cate; at least she doesn't love anybody.

We went together in the direction of the tram. Cate said to me, "Going home?"

Then, having looked round, she added, "No one stirring. Not even a soldier. What a crazy situation".

"We are now a field of battle, nothing else. Make no mistake about it".

"A lot you care", she murmured without looking at me. "But you are right. You've never seen people starving or had your house burnt down".

"Are those the things that give one courage?"

"Grandmother was telling you about it too. You people seem unable to understand".

"Don't refer to me as 'you people' ", I cut in. "I am alone. I try to be as alone as possible. There are times when only the person who stands alone is the only one who does not lose his hand. Look at Nanda, how overwrought she is".

Cate's face darkened as she stopped. "No, you are not like Nanda", she said. "You don't put yourself out for anyone. We will meet tonight".

"Come back quickly", I called out.

The road, the orchard and the old women once more. The cool hill; the usual conversation. "Perhaps the Germans won't come up here", I said to Elvira. I asked about Egle; was she as talkative as ever.

"Why?"

"You know well enough", I said.

I forced myself to listen to Radio Monaco. The Fascists were in point of fact raising their heads again. The voices were excited and threatening. They were working the people up. "They are still in Germany; it's a good sign". I was almost pleased that Radio Rome was silent. It meant that our people were resisting, that the Germans had not yet taken it. The old woman said nothing. She looked at us, astonished and put out.

At *Le Fontane* I found Cate, who told me about Fonso and Nando. "They've got back; they're all right", she said. "But they've not been able to do anything. Tono and the others have been locked up in the Nuove prison". But there was another item of news — our soldiers were running away and no one was thinking of resisting.

XII

I shrugged my shoulders on this occasion too. It was a gesture that came easily to me those days. The ever-threatening catastrophe had come about. It was now clear that Turin, peaceful in the distance, the solitude in the woods, and the orchard no longer meant anything. Yet everything was going on just the same. The sun rose in the morning and sank in the evening; the fruit ripened. I was possessed by a kind of weary curiosity -- I wanted to survive the collapse and be there to know the world that would follow.

I shrugged my shoulders but not without drinking in everything that was said. If I plugged my ears sometimes it was because I knew very well -- only too well -- what was happening and lacked the courage to face it. Salvation seemed a question only of days, perhaps of hours, and we stayed glued to the radio, scrutinised the sky; every morning we woke up with a start of hope.

But salvation did not come. Then came the first whispered news of bloodshed. My thoughts went back to that inn in Pino and that July day when I had last heard voices ominously lowered, and I slowly made my way there, frequently glancing over my shoulder. Whenever we came to a place, especially one where there were houses, we looked over our shoulders and listened hard.

Blockhouse posts had not yet been introduced, but a sense of imminence of the unexpected hung over

everything. The streets and the country swarmed with refugees, soldiers wearing waterproof capes, jackets, rags, anything, who had escaped from the town and barracks where Germans and neo-Fascist thugs were throwing their weight about. Turin had been occupied without a struggle as a flood submerges a village; Germans, boney, green like lizards, manned the station and the barracks; people moved uneasily to and fro, stupefied that nothing happened and that there was no change in the situation; no shouting, no bloodshed on the street; only, endless, subdued, like an underground river, flowed the tide of refugees and troops, trickling through the narrow streets, into the churches, standing at the barriers and in the trains. Other strange things were happening, as I learned from Cate and Dino's whisperings and knowing signs — Fonso and the others were buying up weapons, looting shops and storage-dumps; they were hiding things up at *Le Fontane*, too. In the suburb civilian clothes were being showered down from the windows on to the fleeing soldiers. Where were those fugitives from the Germans ending up? Some got home — the ones who lived on the spot; but the rest, those who were miles from home, the Sicilians, the Calabrians, the backwash of the war, where did they spend their days and night, where did they find to live? "If the war doesn't end soon here", I remarked to Egle and Elvira, "we shall all be giving ourselves up to looting". I put it like this for the fun of working them up. And I added, "It's all right, of course, in the houses of the middle-classes, the villas of the generals who have been mixed up with the Germans". But when I spoke in this vein she soon told me

to stop it. I knew from Dino, who was constantly on the road, that lots of people were going to *Le Fontane* — I caught a glimpse of some arriving at certain times, men with several days' growth of beard, in rags, half-starved. Giulia or Nando's wife was always there, and the refugees chatted and argued and gnawed at lumps of bread. Dino swore that an Englishman had been through, a prisoner of war who only knew one Italian word, '*ciao*'.

The now familiar disorder, the silent struggle, this lowering of the people's morale was a sort of overflow, a crude reaction to the intolerable news given out by the radio and the newspapers. The war raged on in the distance, methodical and futile. Once more we had fallen — and this time there was no escape — into the hands of our old masters, now more experienced and more bloodstained. The cheerful leaders of earlier days had turned nasty; they were defending their own skins and their last hopes. For us it was only a flight into disorder, into a corresponding collapse of every law that normally governed us. To be caught and identified was death. Peace, any kind of peace, which had seemed a real possibility in the summer was now a mockery. We must see our destiny through to the bitter end. How remote the invasions now seemed. Something worse than the nightly conflagrations and explosions was taking place.

I heard it discussed at the Pino inn where I slipped in surreptitiously because it was on a thoroughfare. I strained my ears to find out whether Germans or Fascists had shown up. One morning I came across a soldier — he was still wearing his boots and Fascist

badge — with an old waterproof over his naked torso. He was a Tuscan lad and a humorous twinkle played in the depths of his eyes. He chatted away, swopping yarns with other customers. He told the story of his trek from France, his ten-day flight, referred to his companions by name, laughed and expressed a hope of getting to Valdarno. He asked for neither food nor drink. He was pale and had a few days' stubble on his chin, but he had made himself sufficiently at home to make a hit with the serving-girl who, squint-eyed and bundled up in her clothes, never took her gaze off him where she stood behind the bar.

"The valley bottom was watched by those bastards", he said. "You'd never get by in that open piece of country. They open fire. I have seen heaps of villages burnt to the ground".

"But there's not been any fighting in the hills", said someone.

"Fighting — you mean reprisals", said another. "A village only has to hide a soldier and the Germans set fire to it".

"One night on the bridge . . ." began the Tuscan, frowning at the girl.

We all listened, swallowing back our saliva. The Tuscan asked for a cigarette, quietly amused. Other stories followed. The other customers, peaceful country peasants, told some too. Cruel, unbelievable stories they were, of women and children held as hostages in order to catch the husband, beatings-up ending with a push off a ladder, crops burnt, extortion of information, corpses in the piazza with a cigarette stub between their lips.

“Worse than the war”, they said. But they knew very well that it was all part of it.

“Let’s hope the fine weather will hold”, remarked the Tuscan. I often went down the familiar roads on my own, giving *Le Fontane* a wide berth, avoiding Dino and Cate and her chatter; but the kind of talk and nervous tension to which we are now inured was very much in evidence again at that time, stimulated by our unwillingness to believe, a residual hope and a justifiable egoism on our part. But even then when the days passed like a dream and people had lost all notion of saving their own skins, the tranquillity of despair, the astonishment of finding ourselves alive for another day, even another hour, was continually in the back of our minds when we met anybody or began a new day, and cheered us up. Nobody took thought either for himself or anyone else. We just waited impassively.

I woke at dawn and found myself running downstairs to listen to the news on the wireless. I did not discuss it with Elvira and her mother. I glanced through the paper. Each time the end was postponed to months ahead. Turin, lying there in the valley bottom, used to frighten me. Now not even fires and explosions — for they had ceased — could scare us. The war had come closer to hand; it was within our own houses, in the streets, in the prisons. I thought of Tono, his large stooping head, and I dared not ask myself what had become of him.

Elvira and her mother treated me in a motherly way, rather grimly but submissively. A kind of peace reigned in the house; it was a refuge that had the cosiness of childhood. Some mornings as I watched the tree-tops

from the window, I wondered how long my privileged position would continue. The cool white curtains opened on to the thick foliage and the distant slope where there was a meadow in the middle of the woods and perhaps someone was sleeping by the sheepfold. How many years I had seen it every morning, green with grass or frozen in the snow. Would things like that continue to exist — afterwards? I tried to study, to read books. I thought of joining forces with Dino and teaching him natural history. But Dino, too, formed part of the topsy-turvy world; he had become taciturn and evasive. I noticed that he preferred Fonso's or Nando's company to mine. I told Cate to send him along to me at the villa each morning, and not to allow him on the roads by himself; sitting with me at a table he could concentrate properly. The schools had not yet been opened.

"Yes", said Nando, "let him take him off your hands. Let him study while he's got the chance".

It was cool that evening already. We were in the kitchen by the sink, surrounded by pots and pans. Fonso was not there, nor the girls. The conversation languished in Fonso's absence. Nobody talked for the sake of talking those days. When we were together like that under the light, I stole glances at them, observing Dino's grimaces, the women's silences; brightest and liveliest of all were Nando's confident eyes, those youthful eyes which showed no trace of the war they had seen. His wife was now pregnant — they had contrived it without bed and without a house — and to his present restlessness was added his excitement over politics.

"Professor, will you give my son his schooling?" he

said, laughing, but his cheerfulness and his hope seemed strained and fragile; his wife gave us a rather dark look.

I went off at the first chirrup of the grasshoppers; we did not hear the curfew up there but fear made me quicken my step. In Turin the night echoed with rifle-shots and the 'Who goes there?' of tough youths who were supposed to be responsible for law and order—even the buffoonery and jeering had a smell of blood about it. I thought of Tono, who had already fallen into their hands, of Fonso's sly smile when he spoke about him. Sometimes during the day Fonso put in an unexpected appearance at *Le Fontane*; I asked him if they had changed the working hours at the shop especially for his benefit. He winked at me and drew out a permit in two languages made out for him in his double capacity as messenger and night-watchman. He was the only one of the whole lot who had not become edgy in this last month; his sarcastic remarks were more pointed and amused. His light-hearted sallies and the aggressive idle chatter of earlier days had been replaced by an ironic smile. There was no doubt that he was concerned in some hush-hush business, some assignment that absorbed him utterly, though he did not breathe a word about it. When he had time on his hands he enjoyed talking but now he was fully employed.

One evening when Fonso was not there, we discussed the war with the small newspaper-diagrams and maps in the atlas I had brought along to show Dino. It was the only thing I could interest him in; for some time now his mind had been fixed on his return every evening to the city where Fonso and the other young men were and the curfew, the Germans and the war. The secrets

he shared with Fonso, Nando's stories of guerrilla warfare in the Balkans separated him from me and the women. Nando told us about the atrocities carried out in various ambushes, the reprisals carried out in the Serbian mountains --- wherever the Germans appeared it ended like that: people began to cut each other's throats.

"It's not particularly the Germans", I said. "These are places where you have to take a gun with you to market even in peace times".

The old lady, Cate's grandmother, turned aside from the sink to eye us.

"So it's not the Germans, then?" shouted Fonso's sister.

"Not the Germans' fault?" said the old lady.

"It isn't the Germans who are to blame", I remarked. "The Germans have merely administered the final push and succeeded in discrediting our former bosses. The war is a bigger affair than might appear. The people have seen those who were in charge to begin with, running away, and now nobody's in control. But you can take my word for it, they've not got it in only for the Germans but for their former masters too. It's not a soldiers' war which could end tomorrow; it's the war of the destitute, the war of those who are fighting desperately against hunger, poverty, prison, rottenness".

Once again they were all hanging on my words, even Dino.

"Take our men", I said then, "why have they let themselves get caught and sent to Germany? Why did they have faith in the officials, the government, their former bosses? Now that we've got the Fascists back

again, they're beginning to slip off; they'll go off into the mountains and end up in prison. The real war has now started, the real war between desperate men. Thanks, of course, to the Germans".

"We must smash them all the same", said Nando.

Dino kept his eyes on me all the time, impressed by the silence in which they listened to me.

"If the others don't arrive soon", I murmured, "we shall end up as they did in Montenegro".

The old lady gave us black looks as she piled the food on our plates.

"The day will come", I said as I rose to my feet, "when we shall have our ditches here on the hills filled with dead".

Cate looked at me, serious. "You know so much about it all, Corrado", she said softly, "but you do nothing to help us".

"Send Dino to my house tomorrow", I said, laughing. "I will teach him all those things".

XIII

There was no more room for doubt. What had been happening in the whole of Europe for years was now taking place in Italy — town and country, pale in the autumn sky, were filled with armies and cries of terror. It was not only the year that was dying. I had seen a large rat on a rubbish heap in Turin. It was so tame that even when I approached it did not move its head or start in any way. It had sat up on its hind legs and looked at me. It had lost all fear of human beings.

When winter came, it was I who became afraid. I was used to the cold — like the rats and the rest of them — used to going down to the cellar and blowing on my hands. It was not the discomfort nor the ruins, perhaps not even the threat of death from the sky; it was the secret that I had finally grasped that such things as gentle hills, a city veiled in clouds, a pleasant tomorrow could exist while at every moment, only a few yards away, the most dreadful things were happening, bestial things that people spoke about in hushed voices. Life in the town had become more savage than in my own forest. The war in which I had been sheltering, so to speak, and which I persuaded myself I had accepted and even come to uneasy terms with, was getting more brutal, biting deeper, right down into one's nerves and brain. I was beginning to look round me, panting like a hare at its dying gasp. I would wake up in the night in a panic. My thoughts had turned to Tono, to Fonso's cynical smiles, conspiracies, tortures, the latest dead.

I thought, too, of the places where they had been dragging out their existence for the last five years.

Even the newspapers — which were still appearing — admitted that there had been a certain amount of fighting here and there in the hills and that the resistance was continuing. They promised punishments, pardons, tortures. Disbanded soldiers, they said, your country appreciates you and calls on you. Up to the present, they confessed, we have made mistakes; we promise to do better. Come and save yourselves, come and save us. You are the people, by Heaven, you are our sons, you are scoundrels, traitors, cowards. I realised that all these familiar empty phrases no longer amused people. The words had something obscene about them. There were times when I would have liked to have confessed my shame.

Instead, I kept silent. I would like to have skulked off, like a rat. Animals, I reflected, did not know what was going to happen. I envied them. My female hostesses had this to be said for them, they were completely ignorant about the war. Elvira suddenly realised that therein lay her strength. By now the cold weather drove me indoors too, and returning thither from Turin, the orchard or from uneventful walks over the bare, yellow hill, it seemed almost pleasurable to forget the eternal and monotonous anguish and fear in its den-like warmth. I was ashamed even of this feeling.

Dino came along those November mornings and we studied his books together. I got him to talk about what he knew. He would break off without warning and digress about the latest rumours, something a passer-by had told him about Germans or partisans in the maquis.

He already knew the first stories to come in, of amazing surprise attacks, acts of provocation, spies being shot. He stopped short whenever Elvira came in. With every fresh piece of news I thought what a terrific legend one believed in during those days, and how only a boy who had the vaguest knowledge of it all could live in the midst of it without astonishment. It was purely chance that I was no longer a boy like Dino. Twenty years before I had been, and the sort of surprises I felt were nothing compared with his. "Look", I said to myself, "if you were to die in this war, all you would be leaving behind would be a boy".

"Why don't you put on your sailor-suit any more?" I asked him.

"I wear it at school. When will the schools open again?"

Even Elvira would call him over to her to the pantry when the lesson was over and give him sweets, trying to discover whether he would be going back to school, whether he had any sisters, whether he remembered his father. Dino, embarrassed, would turn it off with a joke, frowning at the same time.

"He's like me", I said to Elvira. "When I was a boy and anyone kissed me, I used to wipe it off with my hand".

"Boys", she said, "boys nowadays! The mother goes out to work and the child grows up the best way he can".

"There's no peasant boy whose mother doesn't work", I said. "It's always been like that".

"And what about this woman who plays at being a sick-nurse? Do they live at the inn?"

“Having an inn. Under present circumstances . . .”.

Since the occasion when she had wept, Elvira had not given herself away again. It was only too easy for me to get worked up and exclaim that under present circumstances -- with people dying, with all the fires, deportations, the winter and hunger, it was no time to give way to despair for the sake of a whim or some personal heartache. We never said another word about her absurd infatuation. Those scarlet flowers of the orchard were dead; the whole orchard was faded and withered. A great wind rose and swept over it. I told Elvira she ought to be thankful that she'd got a house, a fire, a warm bed and some soup. Plenty of people were worse off. “I've always observed”, she said, touched on the raw, “that those who are looking for trouble always find it”.

“Italy getting involved in the war, for example?”

“I don't say that. It's enough to do one's duty. To believe . . .”.

“To obey and fight”, I interrupted. “Tomorrow I shall return with a dagger and a skull”.

She looked at me open-eyed, in a panic.

It was wonderful how the weather lasted. A little mist or fog every morning, followed by golden sunshine. It was November and I thought about the fugitive from Valdarno and whether he had got through. I thought of all the others, the ones who were in despair and without a roof over their heads. It was lucky that the weather was holding out. The hill looked lovely, the hard earth, friable and bare, now showed through. There were mounds of crackling leaves in the woods. I often thought that I could take refuge there in case of need.

I did not envy the eighteen- and twenty-year old boys. Even at Pino military demonstrations were taking place. The Republic was rebuilding an army. The war was tightening its grip.

Then the schools re-opened. One of my colleagues came to collect me, the fat, melancholy teacher of French, with whom I had not exchanged a word for some time. I found him sitting in the drawing-room, opposite Elvira, waiting for me.

“Oh, Castelli”.

Castelli glanced round him and said that this was a real house. He lived in a room in the city, and his landlords had gone off into the country, leaving him alone in the huge boarding-house. “You’ve got a stove here, at any rate”, he said without a smile.

Then Elvira went off to make coffee for us. I made some light-hearted remark about the school. Castelli listened with the unmoved air of someone who has something on his mind. He looked so huge, so constrained, I felt worried about him even on this occasion.

When the coffee arrived he still hadn’t come to the point. “Just a little”, he said to Elvira. “I don’t deserve it”. I watched him as he sipped and thought, “Poor fellow. He’s the father of a family. Why is he living alone?”

At the door, I said to him, “Well, Castelli, what is the trouble?” It was not until he reached the porch in the cold air outside that he confided in me. I had donned my overcoat and we were walking on the gravel path. He asked me if I thought the war would soon be over. He had asked me the same question before in the

drawing-room. "You'll never be called up", I said to him. "You are older than me".

But Castelli was not thinking about the call-up. "A pack of fools!" he muttered, half-indignantly. It was not a political judgment. Castelli knew nothing about politics. He lived to himself. But they had told him that if he worked at school it was tantamount to accepting the Republic, recognising the new government. "Whom can we trust?" he said suddenly. "If we only knew whose hands we were in".

"The same as before, of course", I replied. "Only they're livened up a bit now".

"But how will it end?" insisted Castelli.

"Who has put this scruple into your head?"

It was, as I expected, our colleague, the gymnastic instructor, ex-Fascist and former group-leader. The latter made no mystery of his desire to resign in order to avoid compromising himself, and he was already accusing all the others of opportunism and wilful indifference in their attitude towards the Fascist war.

"You've got to decide", he had said to Castelli. "The country is above all personal considerations".

"Does Lucini talk in that vein?" I asked. "If so, he has either turned informer or the war is really over".

I immediately regretted my remark. Castelli went off crestfallen, and I realised that suspicions, fears and a hundred uncertainties were gnawing at his heart. He went off with bowed head, and my thoughts went back to Tono.

Nobody mentioned the latter at school. I saw my colleagues again; I saw Lucini; classes were secretly resumed; some of the senior boys were missing. It

seemed absurd to see the porters at the school-entrance again, hear the shouts of the boys and set them their homework. The ball had the same sound as in the past and it made me jump every time it went. The chilly classrooms forced us to keep our coats on; there was an atmosphere of removal, of a temporary existence. I began to take my meals in my old restaurant, watched my step carefully, effaced myself, and went to meet Cate.

In the evenings she, Dino and I went into the hills.

"If I only had money", I remarked to Cate, "and did not depend on other people; if I could make my way into the depths of the country and stick there for ever!"

"You seem to me to have everything", said Cate. "I can't think of anyone who is better off".

I felt myself blushing. "They were wishes, not protests", I said hastily. "I was joking".

"You're trying to avoid thinking about the war", she said. "But you cannot".

We walked on for a while in silence. Dino trotted along the road beside me.

"All I ask is that it should end", I said.

Cate raised her head with a sudden movement. She said nothing.

"Yes, I know", I grumbled. "The only way is to stop thinking about it and work. Like Fonso, like the rest of them. Throw oneself into the water so as not to feel the cold. But suppose you don't care for swimming? Suppose you're not interesting in getting there. Your grandmother spoke wisely when she said: 'Whoever has a loaf of bread doesn't move'".

Cate made no reply.

"Let's hear what you think, signora".

Cate gave me a swift glance and smiled faintly. "I have already told you what *I* want".

Lowering her eyes, she looked at Dino. It was a hint, an indication, a fleeting allusion so to speak. Perhaps it was an unconscious thought, an inward promise. "If you play your part", it seemed to say, "there is Dino ...". I had been thinking along those lines for some little time. But such thoughts are difficult to put into words. The hint itself had annoyed me. "After all", I thought, "what does she think? I don't care a damn about Dino".

"Doing or not doing these things", I said aloud, "is always a matter of chance. No one starts it. The patriots and partisans are all men who have been disbanded, discontents, men who have been compromised for some time. People who have already fallen into the water. It's all the same".

"Plenty of them are not compromised in any way", said Cate. "Every day someone falls who could have stayed quietly at home. Take Tono, for example ...".

"Ah, but that is where the old lady is right", I exclaimed. "It's a class fate. It is the result of the life you lead. It's not for nothing that the future is in the factories. I like you because ...".

Cate said no more. She merely smiled.

XIV

I had stopped going to visit them in their house where Cate also spent an hour in the afternoon. I had stopped because Fonso and Nando were always out, out of the city in point of fact — and because either you do those things properly or there's no point in doing them. To get involved for the fun of it is merely stupid. But now you ran a risk wherever you were. We were living in times when no one — however much of a coward — could be sure of waking up next day in his bed. As during the air-raid days. The old lady was right. The priests were right. We were all equally guilty; we would all have to pay.

The first person to pay was the most harmless one among us, Castelli. Despite the boys' restlessness and the Headmaster's smooth speeches, despite another air-raid that drove us down into the cellar like rats, the vast corridors leading to the classrooms, the leafless courtyard and the accustomed periods of silence still gave the school the atmosphere of an ancient monastery, turned it into a place of refuge and tranquillity. It seemed odd that some should think of finding peace and a good conscience elsewhere. But Castelli, now a victim of the ridiculous Lucini, Castelli who was already only giving private lessons, did not think of asking Lucini why he wasn't also leaving the place. They would stride up and down the entrance-hall, and Lucini would frown, small and aggressive, bare his teeth and get angry.

Castelli had a brief interview with the Headmaster and one fine day tendered his resignation.

The Headmaster's secretary mentioned it to me in dubious tones. "Blessed are the diabetics", he commented. But the matter did not go too smoothly. I also was summoned to the Headmaster's study. I gathered from his tone that something was boiling up. It was not merely a charitable inquiry. It did not seem to him a case for that. All he wanted to know was whether I knew anything about the decision on the part of a colleague of mine; had there been any speeches, did I recall any strange motives he might have . . . Then he suddenly waxed indignant. "We should all like to stay at home. It would suit everybody in these times. But we can't all. We headmasters are in the most exposed position. We have to account for everything we and you utter. . . .". I remembered the time, the year before when he had spoken to us at a meeting, of the noble confidence which, in that difficult hour, should exist between us and the Headmaster. Lucini had been a Fascist at that time.

I was unable to restrain myself and I mentioned his name. I bit my lips immediately afterwards; the Headmaster's face clouded but then we began to laugh. "But Lucini is Lucini", he said. "We all know Lucini".

"But we weren't talking about him", I said sharply.

We eyed each other askance. Then the Headmaster heaved a sigh as if he had a very stupid schoolboy in front of him. "Castelli", he said. "Castelli. Let us go". He pursed his lips and I looked at him.

"Castelli?" I said. "But he's a saint".

Then he rose to his feet and went to the door; he

pushed it and returned quietly, stopped and tapped his forehead. He gave a sigh of impatience. "Castelli has spoken to me most indiscreetly", he said. "Some trouble is brewing up, I am sure of it. The danger comes from the boys. I suppose you don't know whether he's been talking to the boys?"

"Only Lucini can say. They are always arm in arm".

"We must stop it", he snapped. "We cannot compromise Lucini".

"Why not?" I said, amused.

The Headmaster then gave me a sly look. He sat down at the table again, clasped his hands and held them across his paunch. At last he seemed appeased.

"I wish to speak to you quite frankly", he said quietly. "We are all on edge these days. Whatever one colleague says to another or what we say between these four walls goes no further. I venture to think that we are one happy family. But we have a duty, a mission to fulfil. Before the boys and their families, the whole nation in this wretched country, we are expected to set an example. Do I make myself clear? Irresponsible gestures, risky attitudes on our part . . . we will speak later of the conscience question if you wish . . . may have consequences . . . involve . . . jeopardise . . . us. The eyes not only of the boys but of many people are fixed on us. . . . Do I make myself clear?"

We did not discuss the matter of conscience. Neither of us was over-anxious to do so. All I did was to promise him that I would try and persuade Castelli to withdraw his resignation. Instead, I went to Lucini's and asked him quite seriously about his health. Lucini grasped the inference and became angry. He snapped

back that the present was not the time to stand around in one's slippers and that anyone with any guts should commit himself.

"Commit yourself how?"

"People haven't understood this war properly. We started off with a regime that was lousy. Traitors they all were and traitors they still remain. But the test by fire will sort us out. We are going through a revolution. This delayed republic . . .".

He wound up with a conclusion of sorts. His notion was that the time was urgent, that we should take part in the fight and save the country, aligning ourselves with the side that would make the revolution and dictate the peace.

"But who is going to win?" I muttered.

He looked at me dumbfounded and hugged his shoulders.

I accompanied Castelli home and described the Headmaster's fears. He listened to me, full of remorse. I spoke to him about Lucini and asked him if they had made their request together. "A fat lot of good it did", I said, "your stopping to come to school one fine day. What use is it to you broadcasting your stupidity to all and sundry?"

It served him to the extent that he needed half pay. "Lucini", he said, "cannot resign because once he leaves the staff, who can he give lessons to? Does anyone take fencing lessons these days?"

The matter was becoming more and more absurd. I explained to him that no one would ever dream of reproaching us for having served the present government. If that were the case everybody would have to

down tools — tramwaymen, judges, postmen. Life would come to a full stop.

Calmly obstinate, he said that this was precisely what was wanted. "Don't touch your salary, then. It's government money".

He shook his head and went off. I returned home agitated and in a bad temper. I imagined the ladies' faces — Cate's, for example — if I had made a similar gesture. But perhaps it would have pleased them, even Elvira, for a different reason. That's how it is, I thought all the evening, the man who runs risks and does something active is like that — he doesn't keep turning things over in his mind. He's like a boy who is ill and knows nothing about dying. He doesn't look within himself; he is not even refusing his salary. He is acting according to what he believes to be his own interests, just like the lot of them, just like anyone else.

In those days they wrote to me from home on special holidays. My sister gave me descriptions of how it was on the land, regretting the fact that I was spending this year, too, in the city. It was true that travelling was difficult and the trains uncomfortable. Life is pretty hard everywhere, she said; there's no news here. The letter was enclosed in a hamper of fruit and meat and there were some Christmas candies too.

I took half the contents down to *Le Fontane* for a New Year celebration which we had promised ourselves with Cate. They were all to come along. One day the grandmother and the girls were busy with the cooking and Dino joined me in a walk on the hill to collect teasles and chestnuts. It was a bright but bleak day; snow had not yet been seen that year. Dino told me he

had been into the town to see the pavement on which they had shot three patriots; the splashes of blood were still there; if he had been there the day before, he could have seen the bodies. Some of the passers-by stopped to look at the spot. I told him to forget it all and switch his mind over to the festivities. He said that the bullet marks could still be seen on the wall.

A parcel of books and a pocket torch was waiting for him: he would find them on his return. Cate had already thanked me. I wasn't sure that the party would appeal to Dino. I had never prepared one for a boy before. But could one give him a pistol for a present?

We went back, numb with cold but very cheerful. It was beautifully warm in the kitchen. The old people were there and also Fonso, Giulia and Nando. all of them in fact. "It's safe here", they said. "You're not on tenterhooks all the time as you are in Turin". "And to think", they added, "there's enough room in the cellar for us all to fit ourselves in against the wall. You too, granny".

The girls laughed and waited on us at the table. "It's Christmas now", said someone, "let's stop".

We spoke about Tono. He was in Germany at Buchenwald. They spoke of the others whom I did not know, about escapes and tricks they'd played on the enemy. "There are more people in the mountains than here at home", said Nando's wife. "Heaven knows how they celebrate Christmas".

"Don't worry", muttered Fonso, "we've sent them wine too".

I looked at old Gregorio, who sat there in his shirt-sleeves, his shoulders hunched, quietly chewing mouth-

fuls of food. He did not say anything; he appeared to be listening. He watched quietly as if he had heard all this talk every day since he was born. The anxiety that lay behind all their cheerfulness did not affect him. He reminded me of my own native place. He was the only one among us who could always be seen on the hill. "We will go down from the hills when the season is favourable", said Fonso.

"They'll soon turf you out", I interrupted. "It would be better to stay in the hills".

Even Cate agreed with me. "This summer", said Fonso, "they will come and dig us out up here. We ought not to give them time to do so".

"Until the English come to our rescue", laughed Nando, "we shan't have any arms that are any good. The Germans and Fascists are our only arsenal. If they don't bring them to us, we shall have to go down and pinch them".

"What a war, what a war!" cried one of the girls. "Whoever gets away first is the winner".

We laughed and talked loudly and then Dino, who had been drinking too much, began to play the fool and run round the table, pointing his electric torch as if it were a revolver and flashing it behind him. I remarked that the Germans had four years' expert knowledge of guerrilla warfare and we need not have any illusions.

"To think we've got to see them in our own homes", said Nando.

"Better that, than as it was before".

"I'll say".

Nobody spoke about the end. Nobody hazarded a guess about the time element at all. Not even the old

lady. They said, "Another year" or "Next summer", as if it was a matter of no importance, as if flight, bloodshed and death in an ambush were items of normal, everyday life.

When the dessert and sweet appeared on the table they spoke about my home district and the partisans up there. Cate inquired about my old parents. Fonso, who was organising things in Turin and the hills round about, referred to clandestine activities in the mountains. He had no special news, he was in a different sector, but he knew that it was a wretched country, where too many disbanded troops had gone back to the land and had given up all thought of the war.

"Are the hills like these, is it possible to find a hide-out there in winter?" I asked.

"That's always possible", he replied. "The thing to do is to split up the attacking forces. When every house, every village, every hill has its own defenders, how can the Fascists make a front, answer me that?"

"Every German we lay hands on", said Nando, "is one less to fight at Cassino".

Incredulous, I thought of the vineyards and hills up here. It seemed unbelievable, absurd, that even there they would shoot and lay ambushes; that houses would burn and people die.

"Perhaps you can tell me", snapped out Nando's mother, "whether the English will thank us for it?"

"Come, come", said Fonso. "We're not fighting for the English".

The room smelt of smoke and wine. Cate lit a cigarette too. They switched on the wireless. The general din increased, and it was very pleasant to lean against the

stove, listening to all the voices in that warm atmosphere. I had gone out into the courtyard a moment before with Dino, and while he nestled up against me in the dark, I had lost myself for a moment among the stars and in the night space. The same stars of the time when I was a boy, the same which twinkled even now above the city and its defences, its dead and its living. Was there no little corner or quiet courtyard where at least for that night one could contemplate the stars without your heart in your mouth? From the door came the bustling noise of supper and I reflected how close death was to us all. Then Dino called me and we went back into the house and its warmth wrapped us up like a blanket. The girls began to sing.

The day after I went down to Turin. I called at school and found Fellini there with his beret pulled down over his eyes. He babbled something about the seasonable feasts, and added, "Someone's made a Christmas cake of dung".

Fellini usually spoke in that kind of vein, accompanied by an insolent leer. I waited for the rest and it suddenly came.

"Have you heard about Castelli? They've suspended him and locked him up"

XV

The year ended without snow, and at the beginning of the new term, the Castelli business provided the sole topic of conversation. "A good job it's not cold", they said. "However, if it is true that he has incipient diabetes, he will certainly be leaving his bones behind". "But what can be done for him?" "Nothing", we whispered. "Nothing. The maquis might extend its activities". Lucini fell silent; he was upset and bad-tempered. Every time I arrived under the school entrance-porch, I expected to see a carload of Germans or soldiers. "They're keeping a close eye on us all", said someone, "the boys, the houses. What a do. They'll take us as hostages".

Old Domenico said, "We are at the point when even if you're ill, you can't risk lying up".

"Watch out, sir", the most wideawake of the boys would call out.

Those days I was sorry even for the Headmaster. He heaved great sighs and started every time the telephone rang. It was obvious that Castelli had put a rope round his neck by speaking to the superintendent. No one missed his flabby, melancholy face. He had brought it on himself. Furthermore, when one thought about it, had he not previously been living as if he was in a prison cell, obstinate and alone? But then we all lived like that, behind walls, tense and fearful — every step, every voice, every movement catching us at the throat. "Silvio Pellico, at any rate", smiled the Headmaster.

“has been content to go inside without jeopardising any of his colleagues”.

“But are there no relations to consider?”

“I hope to God *he* hasn’t forgotten”.

But we forgot Castelli; that is to say, we stopped speaking about him. Yet, no less than Tono, Gallo, the soldier of Valdarno and Egle’s brother, Castelli would suddenly crop up in my mind at some moment of strain, an alert, dawn chilly with hoar frost, the arrival of some worrying piece of news. I thought of them especially at night as I went to bed in the dark or in the morning on my way down to Turin as the sun lit up the windows of the fourth floor in a harsh orange gold. The winter, the golden haze and mists had always reconciled me to the world, given me a little hope. Even in the early years of the war, the notion that these pleasures still endured in the world made me feel optimistic. Now even this was vanishing, and I did not dare raise my head.

Egle had talked to us volubly about her brother. She considered that he had returned to his senses again and she did not appear worried. No, he had not gone over to the Germans, it wasn’t worth it. Nor had he joined up with yesterday’s enemies, he had too great a sense of loyalty; he was at Milan, working as an engineer in a factory, in semi-hiding, so to speak, with friends. He had donned civvies.

If I had to flee, I wondered in those days, or if I had to hide, where would I go, where would I sleep at night and get my food? Would I find another place like this house, a little warmth and respite? I felt guilty, like a hunted man; ashamed of my undisturbed days. I

thought of stories and rumours of people who had taken refuge in monasteries, church towers, sacristies. What sort of a life would it be within those cold walls, behind stained-glass windows, among wooden pews? A return to childhood, to the fragrance of incense, prayers and innocence? They were certainly not the worst features of those days. I was conscious of a desire, a frenzied longing for the constraints of that kind of life. At first, as I passed before a church, I thought only of old spinsters, bald old men on their knees, the tedious mumblings of prayers. Supposing all that did not matter, that a church or a monastery was, instead, a place of refuge where, with one's head resting between the palms of one's hands, one could wait until one was restored to calm? But that did not require a church with its aisles and altars. All it needed was peace, an end of bloodshed. I remember I was crossing a piazza, and the thought pulled me up. I began to tremble with joy to think of such unexpected happiness. To enter a church and pray, I thought, is to live in peace for a moment, to be re-born in a world without bloodshed.

But my conviction waned. Shortly afterwards I discovered a church and entered. I lingered by the door, leaning against the cold walls. At the back, behind the altar was a little red light; there was no one in the pews. I fixed my eyes on the floor, and the old thoughts returned; I wanted to renew my joy and certainty of an unexpected peace. But I could not. I found myself wondering instead whether they sent Dino to mass. They had never said anything about it to me. I did not remember what he did on Sunday mornings. Certainly the old lady went to mass. I suddenly felt overcome

with boredom and went outside to breathe in the open air.

I did not mention that moment, that inrush of joy, to anyone, least of all Cate. I wondered whether the people who went to church, my old cronies, the parish priest of Santa Margherita, experienced a similar feeling — whether in prison or during an air-raid or when facing a rifle-barrel, some people enjoyed the same kind of tranquillity. Perhaps death was acceptable on those terms. But it was not a matter one could discuss. It would have been like going back into church, taking part in some rite — merely a futile gesture. The finest moment of the service, the best thing about the altars and empty aisles was the moment when you once more emerged into the sunlight and the door closed behind you, and you were free, alive. That was the only communicable experience.

In the warmth of the dining room, under the cone of light while Elvira was cooking and the old lady dozing, I recalled the frosts, the corpses, the flights into the woods. Within two months at the most, it would be spring, the hill would be clothed in green, something new and beautiful would be born under the sky. The war would be decided. People were already talking about offensives and further landings. It would be like emerging from the air-raid shelter under the parting shots from the raiders.

I said nothing to Cate about my experiment, but I was anxious to find out whether she believed in those things. She frowned and replied that she had believed in them once. She lingered on the path — it was dark already, we were returning from Turin — she said that

sometimes she had an impulse to pray but she knew how to desist. You were no use to anybody in a hospital unless you had got your nerves under control, she observed. Too much depends on you.

"But it's praying that calms down your nerves", I said. "Look at monks and priests, they are always calm".

"It's not through praying", said Cate. "It's because of their vocation. They have experience of people of every kind".

It occurred to me that we were all living as if we were in hospital. We took the road again. Peace, the futile respite, now seemed absurd and valueless. It certainly could not be discussed.

"It's no use praying unless you believe", said Cate.

She spoke in a dry manner as if in reply to a speech.

"And yet you must believe something", I said to her. "You can't live unless you do".

Cate took me by the arm. "Do *you* believe in these things?"

"We are all sick people", I said to her, "and we would like to be cured. If we have a sickness inside us, we only have to be persuaded that it's not there and we are better. A person who prays is, so to speak, cured for the space of time while he is actually praying".

Then Cate looked at me in surprise. She was waiting for a smile that did not materialise. "Really sick people have to be nursed and cured", she said. "Praying is not enough. It's like that in everything. Fonso says so too. 'It's what you do that counts, not what you say', he says".

Then we spoke about Dino and we felt less con-

strained. Cate admitted that she ought to bring him up more courageously, teach him to understand things for himself, leave him time to decide; but she had failed. The grandmother sometimes took him to mass and sent him to instruction in the catechism. I told her that whatever one did, children could not make up their minds, and that sending them or not sending them to catechism was making a choice for them and teaching them something they have not asked for. "Not believing in anything is a religion too", I said. "These things cannot be avoided".

But Cate said that it should be possible to explain the two different outlooks to a child and then tell him to choose. Then I began to laugh, and she smiled too when I told her that the way to make a Christian is to teach a person not to believe and conversely. "That's true", she exclaimed. "That really is a fact". We stopped in front of the gateway, my dog jumped up at me, it was the only occasion on which we discussed the subject. The next evening I saw her at the tram-stop.

It had been precisely that day when I had thought of showing up where the others were, outside the Dora suburb. Then because of the cold and long trek, I had curtailed my walk, gone home under the now leafless trees, reflecting on the theme of our conversation, thinking of Castelli again. Elvira told me that a young lad had been asking for me at *Le Fontane*. She did not know who he was. I left immediately, before dark, annoyed that Elvira had found out things in this way. She called out after me to know whether I was coming back for supper or not.

I found them all there, except Fonso and Giulia. Nando greeted me distantly in the doorway. I noticed suitcases and bundles on the tables in the yard. They were all moving about in the kitchen. Dino was biting at an apple.

It was Cate who cried out, "Ah, there you are".

They wanted to warn me not to go beyond Dora. "They are flying low", said Nando. "They're starting again".

"No, Fonso is in the hills", they said. "It's Giulia. She has been captured by the Germans today".

I wasn't afraid, nor did I feel my heart sink even. For months I had been expecting that moment, that shock. Perhaps when something really begins, it frightens us less inasmuch as it puts an end to our uncertainty. Not even their excitement frightened me at first.

"A woman", I said. "It's usually women they dig out".

They did not reply. Another aspect of the matter was troubling them. Had they just chanced on her or had they been watching the place for some time. There had been many arrests in the factory and a good deal of confiscation of materials. She had been summoned into the yard along with other women and forced to climb into the army lorry with them. Someone had immediately gone off to raise the alarm. Probably they were searching the place at that moment. Nando's wife shrieked out that it had been a stupid thing to do to run away from the house. Now they would come and look them all out at *Le Fontane*.

Cate replied brusquely that no one could talk.

"Except Giulia", said the younger sister.

We discussed Giulia's courage. A question was on the tip of my tongue but I dared not put it.

"If they had known anything about it", said the old lady, "they would have picked all of you up by now".

"Poor Giulia", said Cate. "We must take her a change of clothes".

Then I realised that no one at school had thought of Castelli. "Is one allowed to take parcels to prisoners?" I asked.

There was the sound of a car, and we all stopped talking. The car roared louder than ever, and we held our breath. It swept by, and we looked at each other like people dashing panting out of the sea, gesticulating.

"Do they deliver parcels to them?" I asked.

"Sometimes".

"But they help themselves first".

"It's not what you send, it's the thought that counts", said Nando.

No one put into words what I was thinking, but Dino at a given moment suddenly hit on it. "Let's hide in the cellar", he said.

"Stop that", his mother said. But we kept returning to the subject of Giulia. The danger was, said Nando, that she would lose her head and give insolent replies. She hated those people so much. "If they once succeeded in making her lose her temper . . .".

It was night when I left them. We would meet with Cate at Turin. I went out in the dark, feeling a sense of relief, and found Belbo waiting for me in the yard. He startled me. "We're like the hare and hound", I thought.

Carnival time came along, and —‘strange to say — the piazza which I crossed every day on my way to school, was filled with booths, an exhausted crowd, with merry-go-rounds and barrows. I saw half-frozen acrobats and carriages; the somewhat limited amount of merry-making that arose from it all did not cause me the usual depression. It seemed miraculous that there still were people prepared to travel around, cover their faces with chalk and display themselves like this. Half the square had been demolished by bombs, a few idle Germans were moving round inquisitively. The mild February sky gave one’s cramped heart a sense of release. Under the rotting leaves on the hillside, the first flowers would soon be coming through. I promised myself that I would pick some. I now walked along the roads with my eyes skinned in case I was being followed. I let Cate dismount from the tram and get ahead; I joined her half-way up the hill in the clear evening light. She gave me news of Giulia and the others. All they knew was that Giulia was alive; there were rumours of further outrages and reprisals on the part of the Germans. It was always on the cards that one day they would use a woman as a hostage and stand her against the wall. Fonso had stopped coming to Turin: they were organising themselves in the mountains for a Spring offensive. His men were to come and collect what had been dumped at *Le Fontane* during the next nights (according to Cate). “Good”, I said, “get a move on. It’s a mad business anyhow”. She smiled. “I know”, she said.

XVI

A night of warm rain followed, liberating the spring. The next day one could smell the scent of earth in the drenching evening dew. I spent half the morning in the woods, in the ~~lavine~~ vine on the path to Pino, casting round among the mosses and old tree-trunks. It seemed only yesterday that I had gone up there with Dino, and I wondered how long it would be my only horizon. I glanced up at the sky, which looked bright like a stained-glass window. Belbo ran along beside me.

Turning back, I passed by an eminence from which I had a view over the hillside where *Le Fontane* lay. On many occasions with Dino we had tried to make out the road and the building from up there. But now I suddenly saw the yard between the bare tree-trunks with two stationary cars in it; they were blue-green, and human figures were standing around them dressed in the same colour. I felt a kind of nausea; I tried to tell myself that they were Fonso's men; it was as if the sun had suddenly been blotted out. I looked more closely; there was no room for further doubt. I could see rifles in the soldiers' hands.

I did not move for a few seconds; I stared at the hollow, the fresh sky, the group of men down there; I did not think of myself; I was not afraid, merely taken aback at the unexpected way things happened. I had seen that house from above so many times, I had seen myself in all sorts of peril but I had never anticipated

a scene like the one which was now being enacted under the clear light of day.

But time pressed. What was to be done? Had I any alternative than to wait? I wished it could be all over, that it was still yesterday, with the courtyard deserted, and no cars. I thought of Cate, wondered if she had gone down to Turin, if they were arresting her in Turin. I thought I would go closer within range of the voices. A feeling of nausea overcame me again. It was obvious that I would have to go into Turin, risk everything and warn her. I entertained a vague hope that she had stayed there.

There was a great deal of agitation in the courtyard. I saw skirts and civilian clothes but I could not distinguish the individual faces. People were getting up on to the lorries. Soldiers issued from the building and then they mounted likewise. I recognised the old lady. "Will they set the house alight?" I wondered. Then I caught the faint sound of the car engines as they drove off.

Time went by. I did not stir. Everything was quiet again. "If they've taken the old lady", I thought, "they've taken them all". I suddenly noticed Belbo who lay curled up at my feet, panting. "Down there!" I said, and held him by his front paws. He dashed down, barking. I hid behind a tree in a panic. But by then Belbo had run off like a hare.

I saw him run down the road and into the courtyard. I had a sudden memory of that summer evening at *Le Fontane* before anything had yet happened. I listened with my heart in my mouth, looking to see if anyone was left behind. Belbo, panting in the yard, began to bark again against the door, angrily, I heard a

cock crow, loud and distant. I heard the rumble of cars in convoy from the Pino road.

The courtyard was still deserted. Then I caught sight of Belbo jumping up. He had stopped barking. He was leaping round someone — a small boy, Dino it was, who had emerged from under the hedge. I saw them go down on to the road and start off together on the path which I had covered so many times on my way home. It was Dino, I was quite sure. I recognised the red scarf which he wore over his coat and his characteristic trot. I began running like a madman through the undergrowth, over rotting leaves, avoiding or thrusting aside the dripping branches; my emotions of fear, excitement, panic found release in this mad chase. I could see *Le Fontane* through a gap in the trees and the peaceful courtyard. There was nobody there.

Half-way down the hill I met Dino. He was climbing up with his hands in his pockets. He did not look frightened. "The Germans came this morning in a car", he said. "They punched Nando. They were trying to kill him . . .".

"Where's your mother?"

Cate had been taken too. And old Gregorio. All of them. He and his mother had been starting off for Turin and had seen them arriving. They hadn't had time to turn back before the Germans had jumped down and run into the courtyard. They pointed their sten guns at them, shouting orders. His mother had begun to tremble. Nando was eating his lunch but had not finished. His soup plate was still on the table.

"Did they go down to the cellar?"

A German had collected a basketful of bottles. Yes,

they had beaten Nando up in the cellar. You could hear his cries. They had found the crates and the guns. They had uttered oaths in German. A small man in civilian clothes who spoke Italian was in charge. Nando's wife had fallen down in a faint.

His mother had told him to hide and then come and report it all to me. But he had wanted to stay behind with the others, jump up into the car as well. He had rushed forward but the Germans had stopped him. Then his mother had frowned at him and he had run off into the meadow, but his grandmother had called out to him. It had not been much use trying to hide.

"Did she tell you to give me any message?"

Dino said no, and began to describe what he had seen. The man dressed in civilian clothes had asked who used the upstairs rooms, how many people came up to the inn in the evening. Then he had spoken to the others in German.

We got to the gate. Dino said that he had already had a meal and had filled his pockets with apples. All along the road, I thought of the villas hidden away in the parks and that nevertheless one could not be sure of finding a safe hide-out.

But Elvira was at the front door waiting for us. She had put on her cloak to wait for me. She looked solemn and nervous. She ran to meet me, her face flaming red. She stammered in a faint voice, "The Germans are here".

"I know", and I wanted to tell her, but her gesture of seizing hold of my arm and pulling me aside, completely ignoring Dino, frightened me. She was not blushing through embarrassment. She had a wild look in her eyes.

"Two Germans have been", she panted. "They mentioned your name . . . They came in to see your room . . .".

The nausea returned stronger than ever. My legs seemed to dissolve. I moved my lips, but no words issued forth.

"An hour ago", said Elvira in a low, husky tone. "I did not know where you were . . . I did not want them to wait for you. I wrote down the name of your school and the street on a piece of paper. They've gone . . . but they'll come back . . .".

Even today I ask myself why those Germans did not wait for me at the villa or send someone to find me in Turin. It is because of their failure to do so that I am still free and up here. But why I should be saved and not Gallo, Tono, Cate. I shall never know. Perhaps because I am the most useless of them and do not merit their attention, not even a punishment? Was it because I had gone into that church? The experience of danger is making cowards of people every day. It makes one stupid: I have come to the point when I derive no satisfaction from the fact that I chance to be still alive when so many better men are dead. Sometimes after listening to the futile wireless, as I look from the window at the deserted vineyards, I conclude that to be alive by chance is not to live at all. And I ask myself whether in truth I have escaped.

But that morning I did not pause to think. A smell of death filled my mouth. I leaped on to the path behind the woods; I instructed Elvira by the thicket to give my money and bank-book to the boy, and I ran to wait for him in the hollow among the bracken. I told Dino to

make sure he was not being followed and to proceed as far as the gate and look round.

I advised Elvira to tell the Germans that I often spent whole weeks at Turin but that she did not know my address.

Dino called out to me. "There's a man", he said.

I flattened myself on the wet gravel. Elvira turned round and whispered, "It wasn't anything — just a cart going by".

"We are overwrought", I said, and jumped to my feet.

When I came to the place among the bracken I was bathed in sweat. I did not sit down. I paced to and fro to ease my feelings. The vast sky opened up between the bare trees, pale but clearly visible. I realised what the sky meant to people in prison. But the taste of death in my mouth prevented me from thinking clearly. I glanced at my watch. I regretted having promised to wait. The strain was terrible. I listened hard for the barking of dogs. I knew the Germans used police dogs. "As long as Belbo doesn't come to nose me out!" I thought. "They are quite capable of following him".

Then suspicions and interrogations would begin. If the Germans arrested Elvira and her mother, the latter would certainly let on that I was there. I would like to have gone back and implore them not to. I thought of all the injuries I had done Elvira. I wondered if Dino had told her about the arrests they had made and the rifles. I calmed down a little, remembering that they had not even searched my quarters for rifles.

This was how I spent the period of suspense, leaning against the tree-trunks, talking to myself, walking up and down, watching the light. I began to get hungry. I

looked at my watch; it was ten minutes past eleven. I had only been waiting for half an hour; I dared not think of Cate, Nando and all the others, as if by excluding them from my thoughts I was giving a proof of my innocence. At one point I shivered all over and felt half mad. I relieved myself against a tree for the third time.

Dino arrived two hours later, accompanied by Elvira, who had donned her black veil as she did when returning home from mass. "No one has shown up", they said. They were carrying two bundles, one smaller than the other "Here's something to eat and the other's your things", she said. 'The things' were pants, handkerchiefs, razor. "You're crazy", I cried. But Elvira said they had been thinking the matter over and had found me a good hide-out. It was beyond Pino, on the plain, the College of Chieri, a quiet place with its beds and a refectory. "There's a good courtyard and there's a school attached. "You'll be all right there", she said. "Here's a letter of recommendation from the parish priest. It's a seminary for priests. Priests help each other".

She spoke calmly, she was no longer in a panic. Even her blushes had vanished. Everything seemed quite natural and normal. My mind went back to the evenings when I used to say "Goodnight" to her.

"And what about Dino?" I asked.

He was to stay with them for the time being. "We have already explained it to him", she said, hardly looking at him, and he nodded assent.

Once more I felt overcome with weariness and the taste of death returned to my mouth. A mist swam

before my eyes. I seemed to float on a sea of goodness, terror and peace in which priests and Christian forgiveness were also mixed up. I tried to force a smile but my face refused. I murmured something about their returning at once and that whatever they did they were not to come and look me out. I relieved them of the parcels and went off.

I ate my food in the woods and towards evening I found my way to the College by an out-of-the-way path. No one had seen me. I vowed that -- if it were possible -- I would never leave the place.

XVII

The sweep of the cloister, the small brick staircases giving access from the corridors to the loft, and the vast dimly-lit chapel formed a world which I could have wished even more closed, more isolated, more gloomy. I was well received by the priests, who, I gathered, were accustomed to such guests. They talked of the outside world, life in general, incidents in the war with a detachment that appealed to me. I saw the boys vaguely in the background, noisy but harmless. I always found an empty classroom, a stairway where I could linger a while, feel at ease and remain alone. In the early days, I started at every unusual movement, every voice; my eyes were fixed on the pillars, passages, porches, as if keeping myself in readiness to hide again and vanish. The taste of blood lingered in my mouth, and during the rare moments when I managed to calm down and recall the day of my flight and the woods, I trembled at the idea of the peril from which I had escaped, at the idea of an open horizon, the roads and possible encounters. I would have liked the College entrance, that cold, massive porch, to have been walled up like a tomb.

I spent my days moving from one portico to the next. Chapel, refectory, classes, refectory, chapel. Time chopped in this way formed a boundary to my thoughts, passed by and became a substitute for living. I bowed and raised my head, repeated the prayers; I thought about Elvira, wondered how much she knew. But I thought too of the peace and the discovery of that day

in the church, and screening my eyes, I brooded on the terrible situation. The chapel windows were of poor quality and dark; the weather had deteriorated and the sky was overcast; it rained day and night. I brooded in the cold on the horror of the situation and the extinction of hope. When I sat in the refectory amid the clamour of the boys, I would find some dark corner and warm my hands on a plate, delighting in the feeling of being a mendicant friar.

The fact that some of the boys mumbled their prayers, the service, over their food made me feel uncomfortable and filled me with a superstitious bitterness of which I felt guilty myself. But however much I kept a vow of silence, bowed my head, indulged in meditation, I was unable to recapture the peace of that day in the church. Sometimes I entered the chapel alone; in its chill gloom I collected my thoughts and tried to pray; but the stale smell of incense and stone reminded me that what mattered to God was not life but death. In order to move God, to have Him on one's side — I reasoned, as if I was a believer -- one would first have to renounce the world and be prepared to shed one's blood. I thought of the martyrs we studied in the catechism. Their peace was a peace beyond the grave; all of them had shed their blood in a way that I had no desire to imitate.

In short, what I was asking for was a kind of opiate, an anæsthetic, the conviction that I was cosily hidden away. I did not ask for the peace of the world — I asked for my own. I wanted to be virtuous only in order to be safe. I realised this so clearly that one day I relented. Naturally it did not happen in church. I was

in the playground with the boys. They were shouting and playing football. In the clear sky — it had stopped raining that morning — I saw pink, wind-charged clouds. My heart expanded in the cold, the noise, the sudden freedom, and I realised that a sudden burst of vitality, an agreeable memory sufficed to revive hope within me. I understood that every day I got through was one more step towards salvation. The good weather returned as in so many seasons in the past and I found myself still free, still alive. Indeed, on that occasion, the conviction was very short-lived, but while it lasted it was like a thaw, a divine grace; I could breathe, look round myself, think of the morrow. That evening I began to pray again — I did not dare stop — but as I prayed I felt less concerned about *Le Fontane*, and said to myself that it was all a matter of chance, all a gamble, but precisely for that reason I could still save myself.

Dawn was the most cruel time to me, when I was waiting for the rising-bell in my tiny bed in the attic. I listened in the darkness for the sound of thuds, the clatter of arms, words of command being snapped out. It was the hour when trouble occurred, when fugitives were surprised in their hiding-places. In my warm bed my thoughts went to those in prison-cells, the faces I knew, all the dead. In the silence I seemed to see the past; I ran over snatches of conversations in my mind; I closed my eyes and imagined I was suffering with the others. Even that shred of courage frightened me. Then I could hear distant sounds, cheepings, vague noises. I thought then of the great plain in the mist, in the shadows, of the stern wood, the quagmires, the country. I saw the blockhouses and the patrols. By the time the

daylight stole between the slits in the shutters, I had already been awake and anxious for a long period.

Gradually I was drawn more into the ambiance of the College. After a fortnight I took charge of the boys during their preparation-period. I was responsible for a group of twelve-year-olds, and this was lucky because some of the older ones in the uniform of the Fascist Youth movement might have asked me awkward questions. I caught sight of other part-time assistants like myself in the refectory and the courtyard; officers in hiding, they said, young men from Southern Italy separated from their families. I tried to avoid them. During the 'study periods' I supervised boys who sat peacefully at their desks and whose worst lapses consisted of scrapping among themselves for a pen. The pleasantest hour was in the morning when the boys went off to school and the College buildings became empty and silent. The young assistants cleared off too. They threaded their way through the doorway into the narrow street, chased around after girls in Chieri and in the cafés. It was rare fun to hear them at it. This was all they thought about. "We are men", they said. Their insolence frightened me. But the silent morning in the quadrangle or empty classroom which I spent browsing in a book or watching the clouds chasing the sun from under the cloister, gave me a chance to breathe again and restored my peace of mind. It only took a visitor, the sound of a footstep to make me disappear round a corner and dart a glance at the stairway that led up to the loft. However, I had now had so many false alarms that I no longer panicked. The chapel would serve me equally well because it led into the vestry and from

there into a church that was open in the piazza. They did not all leave the premises in the morning, however; some priests would come and go under the entrance-porch; I had often spoken with them. There was one, Father Felice, who listened to the wireless and passed the news on to me and joked in a childish, impassive manner. He glanced through the newspapers. To him war meant the underhand dealings of 'those people', a noisy and remote confusion, a matter that was of small concern at Chieri. "It's a lot of nonsense", he would say. "It's manure this land needs not bombs". One day, two or three enemy formations passed overhead, a silver gleam; the earth shook with the vibrations of their engines; our voices were drowned by the din. Father Felice ran to see them and rang the alarm-bell himself; another priest ran outside and made towards the cellar. "If they should come to Chieri", he remarked, as he tugged the bell-rope, "we are dead men". Distant explosions followed. Father Felice listened hard, with a grimace of disgust and his lips trembled. I could not tell whether he was praying or counting the explosions. I envied him because I realised that he did not differentiate between this mortal peril and an earthquake or any other catastrophe. When he chatted with me, he always accepted me for what I was; he did not worry me about why I lived hidden away in this manner; all he said was: "It must be hard for a man like you to remain caged up". On one occasion I told him it suited me fine. He nodded his head. "Naturally, a quiet life. But a breath of fresh air does no harm". He was quite young, hardly thirty, of peasant stock. He knew how to handle boys, country lads almost all of them, and pretty tough. He

could calm them down, also attract them to him. "They are like calves", he said. "I can't think why they send them to school". I wondered if Dino too was among other boys, whether he went to school as before, and whether Elvira talked to him. I wondered what had happened to the villa and whether they had been searching for me in Turin. It all seemed very remote, beyond the tomb as it were, and the idea of getting any news frightened me. It was better as it was; being in the dark.

Meantime news came through, unexpected news. They summoned me into the parlour. "A lady is looking for you". It was Elvira, complete with veil and handbag; Dino, flushed and freshly combed, accompanied her. "No one has been seen", they assured me. "They have other things to think about". "Not even in the country?" I exclaimed. "Not even in the country".

"They must have been looking for me at home", I said then.

"Your sister has written to you".

They handed me her letter. I opened it with my heart in my mouth. They still did exist then, those country places and the past as I had known it. The letter had been sent off a few days previously. It contained the usual comments on the winter weather. Evidently no one had been looking for me there either.

At this point I noticed a suitcase on the ground and Elvira anticipated me. "It's Dino's things, we brought them in the small cart . . .".

Dino was gazing through the window at the porch and the high wall. A priest was crossing the courtyard.

"We went along to *Le Fontane* the other day. They had not even locked the door, but everything was still in

its normal place. One must admit that the people are still honest . . .”.

She spoke aggressively in an unnecessary whisper. She was flushed and excited. She turned to Dino and said suddenly, “Do you like it here?”

A boy came to summon Dino before the Rector. I looked at Elvira in astonishment. She told him to go and answer up, and turning to me, forced a smile. “We’ve come with the parish priest”, she said. “He says we mustn’t let this boy grow up neglected. He needs schooling and guidance. He can’t go to Turin — who is there to take him? The parish priest hopes to get him into the college. They will, I am sure, accept him; he is virtually an orphan”.

This strange idea upset me completely because of the obvious risk attached. Dino might give me away and I couldn’t somehow realise that he was really alone in the world.

“They are making a special allowance”, insisted Elvira, “for cases like ours. It will cost little or nothing. It is a vast charitable organisation . . .”.

So Dino stayed in the College, and Elvira left us, with anxious glances at me and assuring me that now she could bring more of his belongings and that Dino could now act as a screen for us. She also passed on to me greetings from her mother and Egle. She said they set my place at table every night. Either she or her mother had dreamed that I had been coming down the stairs, and these things always came true.

XVIII

Dino gathered from a look and a gesture on my part that we had never met before. On our way to chapel in the evening, I asked him if he had ever been in a college before. He replied, without raising his eyes, that previously he had been with his mother all the time. He played his part better than I did; shunted around as he had been, he had hardly any need to put on an act. Boys collected round us and some stopped to listen. I then told him that if he was going to live in the College, he would have to forget his past life, not even mention it. "It's only girls that blab, not men".

The following day I saw him running about, shouting with the rest of the boys. Good, I thought. He was not standing sulking in corners; I wondered if I would be as brave in his place. I even felt a certain angry pride and said to myself that he was only a child but that we were made of the same stuff. If Fonso was shut up in a college, would he, I wondered, lead the kind of life I was leading? It was a stupid line of thought: Fonso was up in the mountains, risking his skin. How then could it be possible? All his days were over, as they were for me the morning when they came to take me off. Not even in the remote years before, not even as a child, had I had Fonso's hot blood in my veins. I was different from Dino too. And now I was the only person Dino had left.

I watched him running about. I watched him shoving his friends around in chapel. I watched him staring at

the stained-glass window and praying. He had a pull-over on under his jacket, his hands were stubby and red and he had an obstinate look in his eyes. He had thrown himself whole-heartedly into our game, remaining impassive and giving me surreptitious greetings. My mind went back to the summer -- Gordon, the raving of the savages, the yellow men. Everything comes true, I reflected, even a boy's vague dreams.

We were now, enjoying clear, spring days, and on Sundays the boys trooped through Chieri and the surrounding country in double file. I inhaled the fresh air and sunned myself in the deserted playground. I wondered if the war would end under such a sky in April or May. The news and the wireless started churning us up again. Offensives were raging on every side; there were wholesale landings; we were full of hope. I ventured to put my head out of the porch on one occasion. I realised from that point that no one had ever been searching for me. I had gone out into the narrow street as far as a small piazza --- in a serious, incredulous mood, before a church and a campanile - and I had caught a glimpse of the distant Pino hill, purple, behind the roof-tops. But was it worth running risks if there was a possibility of the war ending tomorrow? I was better off in the courtyard. I did not envy those who went for walks. I heard what they said when they came back.

One knew from the soldiers' barracks that black-shirts and ruffians of every sort were roaming the countryside and firing into windows at night. Their enemies were the young conscripts and disbanded troops. The lads from the South who had taken refuge,

like me, at the college, fooled around under their very noses and cut them out with the girls in the cafés. They told me with a grin of their various adventures — involving park benches and meadows. They still wanted to go on even after the blackshirts had murdered a patriot in the piazza. “Swinish trick”, they said. “He was going about armed, of course”. One day we were called together by the Rector, and he gave us a sermon. We were to stop chasing women. Our good name, the boys. The times might be bad but nothing excused such undisciplined behaviour. Our safety depended on our good conduct. He did not mention the other risks.

Another day I caught Dino discussing the resistance among a group of friends. They were having an argument with one of them, a tall, bony youth, who was defending the Republic. They asked him sarcastically why he no longer came to school in uniform. They were pushing him round. Dino, looking very diminutive among the excited crowd, was shouting in a shrill voice, “Where’s socialism then? Where is it?” But Father Felice had inserted himself among them by then and was chaffing them. “Don’t you know that socialism is a sin?” he then said gravely to the bigger boys. He got a laugh and knocked their heads together. I did not like the smirk on Dino’s face.

I joined him later, sitting at the base of a column. He saw me coming and raised his head. I asked him if he was trying to make trouble and if that was how he kept secrets. “If you were with Fonso”, I said, “they would have shot you some time ago. You’re like Giulia”, I added more gently, “you can’t keep your mouth shut”.

He gave me a calm but puzzled look. “I want to join

Fonso", he said, "I don't want to go back home to the old lady's".

I was prepared for this and let him talk. He knew a courtyard in Turin where Fonso's messages were received. The porters knew him. He was fed up with women. He wanted to go to the hills and be with the others.

"It's not easy", I said. "If they'd wanted you they would have sent for you. Heaven knows where they've got to by now. The Germans are searching round everywhere".

Then I told him he must obey his mother and stay with me. "You don't know how to keep your mouth shut. If you have another lapse, I'll send you back to the old lady".

Those were the days when one kept reading of clashes on the mountains and of German concentrations, of a resolute offensive to exterminate the patriots. A manifesto had appeared. It showed a huge mailed hand, strangling bandits and under it the caption, "So die all traitors". The Fascists were getting wildly angry. News came from Turin almost every day, of men condemned to death of unspeakable brutality. "It'll be a miracle if Nando is still alive", I said.

In the evenings I used to stroll with Father Felice along a vast corridor where the boys rampaged for the half-hour preceding the silence period. We met some of the *assistenti* at the corners and they gave us their views. One of their jokes was to ask him suddenly, "Father Felice, you can tell us. Which of these boys is your son?"

"If it had been you", he replied, "I would have put you on bread and water by now".

Dino was yelling among all the other boys and sometimes got into trouble. "You see that boy?" said Father Felice. "He's a real savage, one of the results of the war. Father and mother in prison, himself running loose. Who's to blame?"

"All of us", I replied. "We've all encouraged him".

I noticed that Father Felice had tightened his grip on his breviary under his elbow. But he recovered and gave a shrug of his shoulders. "However the situation has arisen", he said, "it's up to all of us to find a remedy. He is not the only victim".

Then he opened his breviary, eyeing the boys narrowly. We had discussed the subject of the breviary together one morning. I had asked him to let me look through it, but I could not make much out of it—it was full of psalms and prayers in Latin, ejaculatory prayers, gospels and meditations. There I read about feats and saints; each saint had his special attribute. I read stories of horrible sufferings and martyrdoms. There was that, for example, of the forty Christians thrown naked to die on the ice of a lake, but first their legs were broken by the executioner; that of women flogged and burnt alive, of tongues cut out, intestines removed. It was surprising to think that the yellowing pages of that ancient Latin text, the curious phrases, worm-eaten like the wood of the church pews, should contain so much convulsive life, drop, as it were, with blood so foully shed. Father Felice told me that the all-important item to be recited in the breviary was the Office. With reference to the accounts of saints, he could not think how many that were purely legendary had become incorporated into the book, and that for

some little time they had been waiting for the authorities to prune and revise the text. It required too much time to read the whole properly through every day. "But what matters", I said, "would not be whether a martyrdom really took place. One wants whoever reads it not to forget the price that faith demands".

Father Felice nodded assent. "The question", I said, "seems to me whether any purpose is served by re-reading the same words over and over".

"As far as prayers are concerned", replied Father Felice, "the question of novelty does not come into it. Life is summed up in the cycle of the year. The country is monotonous; the seasons keep coming round. The Catholic liturgy accompanies the year and echoes the work of the fields".

His remarks comforted me and restored my peace of mind. It was my way of accepting the cloistered life of the college, of hiding myself away, of justifying myself. On the few occasions on which I had gone out through Chieri and had forced myself as far as the entrance road, I had seen nothing but quiet squares, low arches and churches, rose-motifs in terra-cotta, doorways. It was incredible that in this and other districts, everywhere in the provinces, in fact, blood was being shed, ambuses laid and that law and order no longer existed. That ancient world of religion and symbol, of wine and grain, of maidens who prayed in Latin but spoke in dialect, gave a meaning to my days, to my life as a recluse. There was no real difference: I could see clearly that I had merely exchanged the woods for the sacristy.

But this state of things did not last. My first intimation reached me in the refectory. The tall youth who

had once been a member of the 'Fascist Youth movement boasted of his intention of denouncing the College for having friends in the Fascist Brigade and for being prepared to divulge the names of the members of the resistance movement whom they were hiding. I did not close my eyes the whole of that night. I told Dino to watch his step. Once they got me inside a military prison I was a dead man. My heart thumped as it had during the days of flight and the anguish of the dawn hours. I did not say a word about it to Father Felice. I felt helpless. It would have made matters even worse if I had punished the wretched lad in question. Then one day the Rector entered with his hat pulled down over his eyes, and beckoned me to follow him down below the stairs. "As long as no one sees us", he kept mumuring to me. "You would be well advised to get away from here. It has become very dangerous now".

Thus I set off without a word to anyone. Dino was in class, and I did not see him. I went off with my bundle as I had come. I left Chieri with my heart beating with happy excitement, and at sundown with the sun in my eyes, as I stood on the top of the bare but moist hills of spring, I allowed my eyes to wander in a way I had long forgotten how to do. I crept cautiously up to the villa, and no one saw me. The first greeting was from Belbo, who bounded up to me along the gravel path.

We had supper later than usual that evening; we listened to the wireless and talked about the war, about Dino, that other precocious delinquent. Elvira wondered perhaps whether people of that kind were only to be found in the large houses and said that if the Germans had not sought me out so far, it was because

their security men thought me far away. No one must see me, declared her mother.

I stayed hidden for some days, even from Egle; I watched the orchard from the half-closed window. I enjoyed finding myself back in my normal surroundings with new thoughts and hopes in my breast. I would have given a great deal to have known something about Cate and the others. Elvira told me that *Le Fontane* had been locked up, she did not know who had been responsible. I used to go out into the orchard with Belbo in the evening and in the darkness my eyes turned in the direction of Turin, where so much was happening; the few stars seen through the bare trees looked like buds on the branches. I did not know what course of action to take; I thought of Dino everywhere I went and of the things Cate had said; I admitted in some consternation that if Cate did not come out of it alive, I would never know from anyone else whether or not he was my son. Perhaps even now she was wanting to tell me, weeping perhaps because she had never told me. Perhaps Father Felice was right and it was up to me and to those who were left behind to find a remedy.

One day Elvira said: "They have been making inquiries about you in Turin. The secretary who knows Egle sends you her greetings".

These trivial incidents pleased me; they restored me to life, were like a pat on the head to a dog.

I spent a week in this fashion but staying indoors depressed me. I still did not dare return to Chieri. I discussed the question with Elvira and she said: "Heaven knows how the boy is getting on. I must take him some apples at least".

So next day she made the trip. I spent the day reading. She was breathless and in a state of fury when she returned. Dino had been missing from the College for six days. I left her inveighing against the priests and the porter. I did not even ask her whether they had done any searching or had any clues as to his whereabouts: I knew where he had gone. I had known it some time. I said nothing but saw him in my mind's eye walking unobtrusively through Turin, avoiding observation, when necessary by throwing himself into ditches and finally arriving up there.

Nothing else had happened in the College. It had been a false alarm as far as I was concerned. The Rector said I could return.

We let two days go past. I told Elvira about the house outside the Dora suburb where one might get hold of some information about him and his friends. I could not risk going there myself. I often thought, "Supposing Cate comes back and asks me where he is?"

Then I made my decision to go back to Chieri. I told Elvira to bring me any news there was. "If no one finds Dino", I said, "he knows the road and will find his way back". I imagined him darting up in front of me the whole way back and myself seizing him by the hand and walking along beside him. But instead I encountered the military patrol at the entry into Chieri. One of the members was a youth, a mere boy; the others had dark, evil faces. Their rifles were at the ready, muzzles raised. They walked past me and said nothing.

XIX

The month of May arrived and even in College the days became more lively and boisterous. In the evening and the cold, fragrant morning light everybody clustered together in the shaded quadrangle bubbling over with news and rumours. The schools were breaking up in a few days; the allied advance had started and had months of fine weather ahead of it. Some of my colleagues who were in hiding, those lads from the South, had already set off to join the lines and save themselves.

The classroom and the refectory became empty. The boarders went home. In a few days they would scatter over the countryside and I stayed behind in the deserted college, listening to the occasional steps of a priest or of some late-arrival. It was an understood thing that we *assistenti* could board and lodge as before, but in that silence, that tranquillity, all my thoughts were of Dino. He had been gone nearly a month, and I was so worried that if I had known how to set about it, I would have started out to look for him. The war news was now so exciting that one no longer heard any talk about the mountains and the resistance. Perhaps there existed no more danger. But Elvira's journey robbed me of any initiative.

She came to the college especially to tell me. She had been to Turin, outside Dora; she had visited the prisons, consulted priests. There was no news of the boy; if he had really arrived up in the mountains heaven knows where he had finished up during the last weeks. Some

of the little bands managed to cross the frontier into France. It was no place for children up there. The rest of them, the women, the mother had been deported a month ago. She had had the news from a chaplain who knew all about the *Le Fontane* business; he thought they would shoot them all. "Anyhow, it comes to the same thing", he added. "No one ever comes back".

What else could I do now under the empty porch except experience, morning and night, the same old panic. It was true that I could go for walks, go across the country and the town squares, but getting through the days in that useless waiting seemed to become more futile every day. Now that the past was only a small cloud of pain, a commonplace regret, my continued stay at the college was as wearisome as being in prison.

I could not return to the villa. I could only go over and over the past, and think in turn about those who had disappeared, listen to their voices, delude myself into thinking they had left something of themselves behind. I felt as if I had undergone a great change since the year before, since the time when I had walked through the woods all alone and with my school at Turin to go to, and I waited patiently for the war to end. Dino had been with me then in the courtyard; his mother had sent him to me. Dino represented a host of pleasant memories; he alone could save me, but I had not been enough for him. I was not even sure that he would take any notice of me if I met him again. If I vanished with his friends he would not give me a second thought. Truly the war was not going to end until it had destroyed every memory, every hope. I already had grasped that fact. And I realised that I would therefore

have to pass through the porch, uproot all those memories and build up a new life. Thinking about all those who had gone away, the *assistenti*, Dino, Elvira — filled me with restlessness. I could not stay on in the College without worrying myself to death about them. I understood Dino. I understood Father Felice. I ought to have been a priest.

Elvira had brought me another letter from my parents; it contained the usual entreaty to spend the holidays with them. Nobody had been searching for me there; it was certainly the safest possible hiding-place. I decided to go there. Even before I had admitted it consciously, I thought about it day and night, repeating in a panic, "The moment had come", but I knew that I had really made up my mind already. The last time had been the year before the war, and I had then said to myself, "As long as I can die up there!" because war imagined in the future is a kind of rest period and peace.

Elvira, however would not hear of it. She did not say that I should be running risks among my people; she knew very well that no one would look for me at home; she spoke instead of the journey, unforeseen occurrences, machine-gunnings, ugly encounters, blown-up bridges. If I was to go, I could read the question in her eyes, would I ever come back? I then told her that I was short of money; I could not go on living at other people's expense; sooner or later, I told her, the person who is kept rebels. "But this war will end", she retorted indignantly, "it must come to an end, and then you can repay your debts by coming back to live with us".

I asked her for a rucksack for taking my necessary luggage. I told her not to tell anyone about this journey

of mine, not even her mother. "Furthermore", I observed, "there's no guarantee that I'll get there". She would like an address. "No need of one", I replied, "I am not changing my way of life, only my hide-out. I think it is better to cover up my tracks".

When she had left me alone with my rucksack, I breathed again. I spent the first days quietly, convinced that I could stay, that whether I went or not was now my own affair. Poor Elvira thought I had already gone. I realised then that my idea of going off was to get away from her and to prevent her from interfering with my protégé. I knew well enough what was in her mind.

But one morning I found the place filled with Germans. At that time neither Father Felice nor the Rector were there; they had gone to Turin — I was waiting for them to hear whether they thought journeys by train were risky. The Germans said nothing, they just billeted themselves on the College. They were troops and army service corps and were dumping their stuff. But the porter came to find me and asked me what name I was going to give; the German commandant wanted a list of all the residents. I picked up my rucksack and departed.

In order to board the train without returning to Turin, I had to turn my back on the hill and walk along roads that were new to me under the open sky. With my heart in my mouth I made for the plain, knowing that by evening I would be seeing the hills again and they would be the right hills. But they loomed up quicker than I expected. I scrutinised the road to see if there were any blockhouses, and on the skyline between the telegraph poles and the low clouds I saw a faint blue

colour. I did not stop until I was pretty close to the hills — Villanova, that was where the railway was. I sat down by a low wall. Girls were cycling by, but there were no Germans or soldiers of any kind; I bit into my bread and looked at the trees, the wild hill, the open sky — I felt envious of Dino, who had been treading these paths for months. I had not been on them for more than a couple of hours.

I had ample time to get bored with the platform, the little station and the hill slopes. Gradually as there were more people, I regained my courage; for a while I had forgotten that the world is filled with faces and voices, and that everybody talked about hunger, flight and war, laughing and hailing each other. I had even forgotten the train; when it appeared among the acacias and did not slow down at once, it caught me up in its wake like a child. Once I had got on and it was puffing along between the trees I learned that the bridge over the Tanaro had been demolished and we should have to dismount there. I heard, too, that patrols were combing all the trains and stopping anyone who had not got a special permit.

XX

But at Asti the sky was filled with low clouds, the winds got up and it was suddenly twilight; no one paid us any attention when we dismounted from the train. I walked along the platform, and in the livid light that accompanied a shower of rain I noticed smashed up railway huts and water-tanks, large pot-holes and broken telegraph poles. I was soon in the country. An arch of the bridge had collapsed. I had time to get my bearings; I made for a covered yard under the first downpour.

It contained people and railway trucks; there was a stable-entrance; someone sitting on his baggage was laughing. Against a background of people and lamps moving to and fro I heard musical, peasant voices that were already flavoured with my own local dialect. It gave me courage. "I seem fated to land up under arches", I thought.

I ate something — a large plate of soup and a little bread which I collected from a kitchen filled with grease and smoke. There were others inside the large room, eating salad and drinking — young ladies, travellers, carters. Under the arches they were chatting about the rain and the roads, transport, of something important that was happening in the Tanaro valley. I mentioned the fact that I was going to a certain locality and asked if it was easy to re-ascend the valley. I spoke in my own dialect. A carter eyed me up and down. "If you only want to pass through, well and good", he said. "It's sticking here that's bad . . .". The Germans had

been operating up there for some days and only the women were sleeping in the houses. "We are watching", added another, who wore field-grey fascist badges. "If the Germans get through the pass we'll cut the corn. If, however, they find us too hard a nut to crack . . .".

I reflected that I was in a different valley and would have to cross other hills. Someone could tell this from my speech and asked the others. "How are we progressing on the Langa?"

A continuous battle was being waged on the Langa, varying according to the nature of the ground. Some zones were completely in our men's hands. While it lasted, that was. The real danger was not along the roads but on the bridges and in the villages. I remembered our old iron bridge along which I had stamped as a child to hear the echo of my footsteps. I mentioned a neighbouring village which you had to cross the bridge to reach. "That's where the Republic is", they said.

Almost the whole night was filled with confused noises mingled with that of the storm. The curfew stopped me from moving on; if you started before dawn you couldn't ask for a room. I threw myself down on some sacks and the carter lent me a blanket. It was chilly for June. Someone had spilled a tray that had wine on it and I could smell the odour all night long in the blustery darkness. Hoarse, sleepy voices talked on interminably about supper parties and past memories.

The carter began to move as soon as dawn broke. He was going my way but only as far as half the length of the valley. He was fat and taciturn with a plaintive look in his eyes. He looked up at the cold clear sky and said, "Off we go".

We travelled all the morning, sitting on two planks with our feet dangling down. We did not talk much; I told him out of politeness that I came from Turin where I had been working, and that I was returning to my parents. He raised his eyes and said, "What you want to do is to take the railway via Alessandria".

How could I explain to him that I was scared of stations and that I preferred his creaking old cart? With the sort of life he led he would laugh at my woes — I should see a mocking look in his eyes. He was neither sad nor arrogant, he was just independent. I caught a glimpse of the hill under the clouded sky; on an eminence stood a small church and a pine tree. My first thought as usual was what a good hiding place the church would make. Vineyards alternated with corn-fields on the slopes, which were still fresh from the rain; I did not ever remember having seen such attractive hills before.

I was becoming impatient with the slow rate at which the cart was moving. I talked about the weather. I asked the fat carter if the roads were safe at night or when it rained. He said he himself preferred the sunlight; in the half-light a shot from someone might always get you; in broad daylight, whether patriots or Germans, at least they looked you in the face. He spoke without partiality, as an obstinate individualist.

We met the Germans; they were were in a stationary car half-way down the hill. Their grey-green uniforms looked the colour of the rain-washed road. The carter jumped down; I eyed a thicket on the hill-top.

Shortly afterwards we were caught up and overtaken by a large, noisy lorry filled with a variety of uniforms.

youths wearing basque berets and carrying rifles. "They are sending the Republic ahead", muttered the carter. "We shall be eating pork by tonight".

At the first village we came to we found them halted in a square. Germans on motor-cycles put their feet down and then started off again; women were watching them from doorways. A shot rang out somewhere but no one paid any heed to it.

The cart moved on again with a crunching sound on the stones. I had to get down. A marine appeared, his rifle at the ready.

We stopped again and while my friend was rummaging round in the box, the former, a freckled blond, raised the tarpaulin cover and looked. He signed to us to continue on our way.

When we had come to the open road, I said, by way of making conversation, "Is there a frontier between those chaps and these?"

His reply was to spit on the ground.

"Have you seen any of these people about? Are there some of them in the villages?"

"Indeed there are", he replied, "up there on the hill. Watching us night and day".

I'm for it now, I thought. If they stop me, it's all up. I could no longer put up at Chieri nor at the villa. Thinking back to the winter scares and the College, I felt nervous, irresponsible again, like a boy. I knew very well that there was not a German in all Langa who knew my name but I had now got used to it all and everybody's terror was mine too; every panic served me as an excuse.

We jumped back on the cart. I stopped talking

because I realised I was always getting round to the same old subject.

"We are at Molini", my companion said suddenly. "It would be a good idea for you to take your shoes off and cross here. I am stopping down there".

We took leave of each other as the cart creaked on its way, and I shouted to him the name where the road with the iron bridge was. He indicated vaguely a hill on the other side of the Tanaro, watched me start off and spat on the road.

When I had got through the water and traversed the wide shore, I rapidly climbed the hill. I wondered as I mounted where Dino had slept and eaten; whether it was a general cart route from Turin up there on to the hilltops. He had set off with his coat and scarf. If he hadn't got to Fonso's, I comforted myself he would have returned. A boy doesn't run risks.

My road wound its way through fields and vineyards; it was very different from the Turin hill; the slopes here were bleached, the earth tilled and crumbling; there were no woods. At least not so far. You could hear the lowing of cattle and the flutter of hens; the air was mild and smelt of home — yet I strolled along slowly, looking round me, keeping my eyes open as I used to when hunting with Belbo in the Pino dells and listening to the earth's secrets, conscious of the roots under the ground and the perpetual terror that reigns in the undergrowth. Now I was a fugitive, literally, like a hunted hare.

By evening I had passed through two or three villages, the road still mounted; in the distance I could see the hilltops with churches and isolated farms on them. No cars or motor-cycles had met or overtaken me since

I had crossed the Tanaro. All I saw were some ox-carts and a few barefooted idlers in a village square. I made a meal of bread and tomatoes which a shrill-voiced girl had sold me. She asked me if I was lost. "I'm on the way home"; I replied. "You are very wise", she shouted. "It's no life here!"

I realised later that she had taken me for a partisan. This fact frightened me. I could not now inquire where there were any because they would take me for a spy. I must plod on without turning back. That evening I did the last stretch of the road alongside deserted fields, and with low clouds above. I could hear the grasshoppers shrilling. I reached the top, and walked up on to the ridge.

A solid, barefooted youth sitting by an irrigation channel in a field, smoking a cigarette, told me where I could doss. He was wearing only a shirt and loose-hanging trousers. He had a knitted beret on his head. "Is it a long way across the valley?" I asked him.

"Are you making for the station?" he said casually in my own dialect. "You shouldn't, it's a German post".

"I'm not afraid of Germans", I said. "I must go across that valley".

"Further up are the partisans", he added with the same imperturbability.

"I'm not afraid of anyone; I'm going home".

He shook his head and tapped his cigarette delicately. "It's a long trek by the paths. But it's late now. You'd better wait till the morning".

He persuaded me to cross the field and a spinney. Behind a cherry tree, I saw one end of a blackish building; it was a stable. There were lofts filled with hay and

straw; below the hill-crest on a level with the fields, was a sudden outcrop of low roofs. I had never seen more effectively hidden-away country cottages; from the road all you could see were ears of corn and the distant slopes.

Otino — he did not ask *my* name — led me under the cherry trees and asked me if I was thirsty. We broke a branch off and stripped it of fruit. He pursed his lips, spat out the stones and asked me if I was going in the Agliano direction.

"I saw smoke there this morning".

I told him I was going by way of Rocchetta, in the valley of Belbo and had come from Chieri. Otino leapt on to his feet — he had long legs and arms — and began knocking down clusters of fruit.

"Where's Rocchetta?" he asked.

"Are they burning villages down there?"

He did not reply, but just whistled. He was whistling the 'stand to'. "You've been a soldier, then", I said.

"I ought to be", he replied.

I spent the night in the hayloft, deafened by the grasshoppers. The air was cold, the mist or clouds covered the fields. I buried myself under the straw. From the darkness within I looked out on to the vault of a sky that was not so black and prepared to retreat into the straw at the first sign of danger. "It is not everybody that has a bed of straw", he said.

I was awakened by the sound of Otino removing his tools from the top of a post. It was a blinding morning light of misty sunshine. "You won't get there by this afternoon", he said. I asked him for some bread. We walked along between the houses that overhung the

valley. I called out to a woman for two loaves of bread. "Can I wash my face?" I asked.

• We drew up the bucket in the well. I got a good view of Otino's bronzed skin and his masculine features in the bright misty sunshine. "This is the road", he explained. "Keep to the path that goes down, locate the railway; find the Tinella, plunge in among the willow trees . . .". I thought back to the time when I used to play with Dino. •

By midday I was walking on the open hills and I had left the Germans and the Republic somewhere behind in the valley. I had lost the main road. I called out to some women who were turning the hay in a meadow and asked how one reached a certain village not far from my own. They indicated the way back to the valley. I cried out that I couldn't follow it, that my road lay across the hills. Then they waved their pitchforks signing me to go on.

There were no villages in sight, only farmsteads on wild, chalky slopes. To reach any one of them, I should have had to climb up steep pathways beneath low, sultry clouds. I examined closely the lineaments of the hill-crests, their ruggedness, their vegetation, the stretches of ground that offered no cover. The colours, the forms, the very smell of the sultry air were known and familiar to me; although I had never been in that actual spot before, I was walking in a cloud of memories. Some of the stunted and twisted fig-trees seemed like those at home and reminded me of the one by the gate behind the well. I shall be at Belbo before nightfall, I said to myself.

A cottage by the roadside, blackened by smoke and gutted, pulled me up short and made my heart beat. It looked like a war-damaged town wall. I did not see a living soul. But the ruin was not recent; on the wall where previously there had been a vine plant was a faint blue stain of verdigris. I thought of all the echoing cries.

the bloodshed and the shots. How much blood, I wondered, had already bathed these lands, these vineyards. Blood like my own of men and boys who had grown up in that air, under that sun, who spoke the same rough dialect and had the same stubborn look in their eyes as I had. It seemed incredible that people like that who lived in my blood and my memory should also have been subjected to war, the tornado, the terror of the world. That fire, politics, death, should overthrow my past like that was a strange fact that I could not accept. I would have liked to find everything as it was before, like a room that has been shut up. That was why — it had not been a mere idle precaution -- for two days I had not dared to name my own village; I trembled for fear of hearing anyone say, "It is burnt down. The war has passed this way".

The road began to descend and then strode up another hill. Up there -- if God willed it -- would be some outlying houses or a campanile. I paused a while in front of the houses and sat down on a gravel-heap and pulled out my loaf of bread. "Some woman will pass or a little cart will be sure to come along".

Sounds of the midday interval rose from the village; thumpings in the stables, children's shouts, water splashing in buckets. A chimney was smoking. The sun had now broken through the clouds and was shining in full splendour; the distant slopes steamed like fresh dung. There was a smell of stable, of hot tar and summer heat.

I had got half-way through my loaf when someone appeared on the road. Two young men, dark and shaggy, in trousers and carrying stens gun at the ready.

Before I could get to my feet, they were confronting me.

"Where are you going?" one of them asked.

"The Belbo valley".

"For what purpose?"

They were wearing round berets and tricolour cocades. While I was talking they were scrutinising my shoes.

I could feel one of them fingering my rucksack on my shoulders and I stepped back.

"Keep your hands where they are", said the first.

I gave a half-hearted smile. "I have come from Chieri", I stammered. "I am on my way home".

"Let's see your papers".

I began to put my hand in my pocket. The one who had first spoken stopped me at the point of his rifle. He smiled calmly.

"I said 'Keep still' ", he repeated.

He put his hand in my pocket and drew out my papers. The other said, "What are you doing here?"

While they were going through my papers, I stared at the village. A flight of swallows passed over the roofs. Behind the head in the round beret was the sky and the distant, wooded slopes. Once beyond those woods and I was home.

The first speaker was examining my identity card.

"What's your date of birth?"

I told him.

"Profession?"

I said what it was.

"Name of your birthplace".

He turned to the other man and said, "Look".

Then I said, "My home is over there".

"It's not true that you come from Chieri", he continued. "Here it says, Turin".

"I was first at Turin and then at Chieri".

They gave me a nasty look. "Can anybody identify you?"

"They can at home".

They exchanged glances. The one behind who had a bony face, shook his head. They did not lower their rifles.

"Listen", I said, impatiently, "you are the first people I've met. I've escaped from Turin because the Germans are looking for me".

The same cold smile again. "The Germans are looking for all of you, to hear you talk".

"Come along", they said to me.

I noticed a group of women in front of the church in the village. I was walking between the two men; I did not raise my eyes to look at the windows and the hay-lofts. A hay cart had pulled up in a narrow lane and two young soldiers in denims were guarding it. A hen ran across the road in front of us.

A tall man in top boots, leather jerkin and with a revolver in his belt, was in front of a doorway chatting to a girl who held a baby in her arms. He was laughing and amusing the child.

He turned and looked at us as we went by. He had a scarf round his neck; his hair and beard were curly. It was Giorgi, Egle's brother. I gave a sign of recognition but he hardly interrupted his antics.

He took a step forward and beckoned. I shouted "Giorgi".

"I know him", I said to my escort.

When we were close, I laughed. "So now this", he said.

"Our encounters are always historical", I said to him, when we were on our own, sitting on a low wall.

He gave me a cigarette. "What are you doing still in civvies, on the public highway?" He spoke in that dry, comic tone which was characteristic of him.

"And what are you doing in my country?" I said, laughing.

We swapped experiences. I did not tell him, however, that I had been a fugitive, that I was on my way to my family, that I had seen his sister and that at his home they believed him to be in Milan. He smiled as he smoked, propping himself up on his hand. "One doesn't know where anyone is these days", I observed.

"That is the beauty of it".

A grey car emerged from a yard and pulled up by the entry into the village. It was driven by an armed youth.

"Are there many of you people down there?" I asked Giorgi.

"Don't you know the district?"

"Your two chaps", I said, "are the first ones I've seen in the flesh".

He compressed his lips. "Am I to believe you?" he asked. "I don't think so". And he smiled.

He told me that he was after supplies. "Is that your part of the world?" and he waved in the direction of the woods. "It is over there, isn't it? We people are pouring out of there", and he indicated the western zone. "All our life goes on there — expeditions, requisitions, jobs of all sorts. It's no use getting browned off. Even those things have their good side".

He pressed his lips together and blew out the smoke. Then I hazarded a question. I told him that the last time I had seen him he was talking about war, but it was the fascist war then. He had donned a certain uniform and did not see eye to eye with certain people, could it be that he had been touched by grace?

"Dis-grace, you mean", he said. "To my eternal disgrace I have taken an oath".

"But the fascist war was something different. Who are the subversive element now?" I asked.

"The whole lot", he replied. "There's not an Italian left who isn't a subversive element". He gave a dry, abrupt smile. "You don't think we're fighting for these damn fool friends of yours".

"What fools?"

"Those who sing the 'Red Flag' ". He threw his cigarette-end down in a gesture of disgust. "The work with the Black Shirts is over, now let's start up with the Reds! "

"But I thought you agreed", I said.

We said no more about it, and I looked towards the valley.

"I hope to get home by tomorrow", I said, breaking the silence and strolling away from the wall. . . . "That is, of course, provided I don't get arrested en route".

He shook his head and said in a serious tone: "You must see you're well supplied with safe-conducts; it's not everybody's idea of fun and games to walk around up there".

I watched their departure against the western sky. I remembered that I had often contemplated the evening sunset when I lived over beyond the woods as a boy.

Perhaps in the present reddening skyline there was still some curve, some recognisable hillcrest, some small tree from those days. The partisans jumped back on to their vehicles — another lorry had arrived — there were ten or so youths with Giorgi, one of whom, a baker evidently, was dusted with flour. I spotted the two men who had stopped me earlier but they did not flicker an eyelid. The cars rattled off out of view. All at once I heard them singing.

So there I was alone, and as the afternoon wore on, I inquired about the villages. I had made an unnecessary detour; proceeding from one road-fork to the next, I had been getting back to the Tanaro all the time; I would now have to retrace my steps for several kilometres and go by the valley.

Then I would have to ascend continually in the direction of a campanile in the middle of the woods traversed by a road, and from there I should see the real hills, my own. It would not be easy to get there by night, but I could sleep in the sanctuary, said one of the women.

I asked if it would be dangerous. Someone smiled. "You belong to these parts. The building may collapse on anyone's head". But the woman said this would not be the case if I went to the sanctuary.

By mid-afternoon I had reached the bottom of the valley. Now that I knew about the campanile up there, I was not afraid of losing my bearings. I walked along cautiously, with a slight drag of my foot as if to emphasise my harmlessness. I was going in the opposite direction from that of the morning; I passed footpaths, small ravines, a wooden wayside-cross. The blue sky

was high above me. Half-way up the slope a group of neat-looking cottages was waiting for me on the road by which I had ascended. I had overtaken a peasant leading a pair of yoked oxen. The next thing I heard was the roar of a motor-car, and I turned round and saw a large cloud of smoke, then two huge lorries drove up at speed, swaying from side to side; they were filled with field-grey helmets, cartridge pouches and swarthy faces. I bent my head into the wind. If they had suddenly fired shots behind me, the shock and noise could not have been worse.

They did not turn round to look at me — they had disappeared. While I mentally followed these Fascists on their journey, I wondered whether they were going as far as the sanctuary and whether anything was happening up there in the villages. I was still suffering from the effects of explosions and bombs they had made on me.

Then there was a real explosion very close, at the top of the road, followed by a rattle and a burst of fire. Then screams and more shots. The cars had pulled up; the air vibrated with the whine of rifle bullets. "Halt", shouted a voice. There was a pause, followed by a pregnant silence, then further explosions and shots, with a sinister hum like steel wires quivering on the vine-poles.

I had leaped behind the tree-trunks and every time a shot rang out I drew back, bent forward and flattened myself on the grass; during the pauses I retreated down the street. The crackle of fire continued, crisp, deadly. I saw the peasant standing still with his oxen at the end of the road.

By the time I joined him, the firing was more sinister

more intense than ever. The loudest explosions were hand grenades; they went off with a muffled thud. The rifle-shots sounded like the whine of living voices.

The peasant had driven his oxen across the road and into a cane-plantation. He saw me coming. In the deadly silence which followed, he darted forward to get better cover. He was old and he clutched the cane-plants. Then one of the oxen bellowed. "Keep them quiet", I said. "Take cover". I jumped into the cane-field, pushing him in front of me.

But the clash was over. Everything was suddenly silent on the road ahead of me. I listened for the sound of the lorries starting up again or of human voices.

The peasant was bending forward between his oxen. He drove them at random into the thick of the cane-field to hide them more effectively. I could hear the crackling of the canes. I called to him in an undertone to stop.

Then the old man sat down, holding the halter in his hand.

XXII

We stayed like that for some little time. The car engine had now been started up and confused voices could be heard among the trees. Then the roar died away.

A woman appeared at the corner. She was running down towards me. I waited for her in the middle of the road and asked her what had happened. She gave me a panic-stricken look. She had a shawl over her head. The old peasant thrust his head from out of the canes. The old woman called out something and cupped her ears. "Are there any people up there?" I asked. She nodded her head but said nothing.

A youth cycled up to the corner at breakneck speed. "Is it possible to get through?" I shouted. He put a bare foot down on the ground, miraculously keeping his balance and called back to me, "There's some dead; lots of them".

When I had cautiously reached the road corner, I saw the huge motor truck. It was stationary and empty across the road. A pool of petrol stained the road, but it was not only petrol. In front of the vehicle by the wheels lay human corpses. The petrol was slowly trickling towards me; it was dyed red. Some people — women and a priest — were moving about among them. I saw blood on the bodies.

One soldier — in a blood-spattered field-grey uniform — was lying on his face, but his feet were still in contact with the coach. Blood and brains were oozing from under his cheek. Another, a little man, was staring

upwards, yellow, dirt-stained, his hands across his belly. Then more twisted bodies, flat on their faces in horrible attitudes, a dirty livid colour. Some of them looked dwarfed and lay there like a bundle of rags. One was lying apart from the rest on the grass verge — he had leaped there from the road, shooting to defend himself; he was kneeling, rigid, against the barbed wire, as if he were still alive, with blood dripping from his mouth and eyes, a boy of wax, crowned with thorns.

I asked the priest if the dead were all men from the lorry. The priest, bustling round and sweating, looked at me, distressed, and told me there were not only those but that the houses further along were full of wounded. "Who attacked them?"

Partisans from up there, he told me, They had been lying in wait for days. "They had hanged four of them", screamed an old woman who was weeping and clutching a rosary.

"And this is the harvest", said the priest. "Now we shall have savage reprisals. From here to the high valley of Belbo will be one huge blaze".

The ambush had been laid between two rocks which afforded cover. Not one of the Black Shirts had escaped. The partisans had driven the prisoners off in the other lorry, not without first standing them up against the wall and threatening to shoot them. "We could murder you in your fashion. We prefer to spare you to live with your shame".

The inhabitants were tying up their belongings in bundles and driving their animals outside the place. No one would risk spending the night at the Two Rocks. Some of them climbed up to the sanctuary, with a kind

of blind faith, others went anywhere, merely to get away from the place. They had until late night time, for the boy on the bicycle who had shouted to me, was dashing off to give the news of the wounded at the telephone exchange and the blockhouse in order to save those who could be saved. The next day the roads and lanes would be a death-trap.

The priest had rushed into the house; one of the wounded was dying. I stayed among the dead, too horror-stricken to stride over them. I looked up at the campanile and knew that I could not get home before tomorrow. I felt instinctively drawn back to the road I had already been walking along, convinced that I ought still to keep my guiltless village, the river Tinella and the railway between me and the impending storm. Otino was back there; he could hide me. If I could manage to get through the German position before nightfall, I could wait with him until the fury had abated.

Without casting my eyes down again, I set off and overtook the peasant with his oxen who was still standing there with his jaw dropped in front of the cane-field. I kept straight on and within an hour I was climbing the final hill in the sky, already becoming cool, beyond which lay the Tinella valley.

Once more I caught sight of some hillcrests I had seen during the morning. The *campanili* and the isolated cottages had a message for me; I wondered if I should continue to live among all these horrors back at home. Meantime I went along the road, keeping a sharp lookout at the road junctions and where valleys opened and

being careful not to show myself on the skyline. I knew all about rifle shots and the whining of bullets.

I gained the Tinella and the railway in the twilight. While I waited among the alders in the mud, I could hear the puffing of a train. A long, local goods train chuffed slowly past, and I caught sight of some tall German soldiers on the footboard. The fact that they were on the move seemed to me a good sign; it meant that so far there had not been an alarm in the zone.

I crossed the railway and sought out Otino's hill. It was difficult finding one's bearings among the acacias but the hilltops were clearly silhouetted. I followed a path that looked hopeful and listened for the sound of footsteps or the rustle of leaves above the shrilling of the grasshoppers. The sky overhead was now crowded with stars.

I did not find Otino but it was the hill, I was sure of that. I was tired, desperately hungry and I dragged my feet along the furrows until I found myself before a small building in a vineyard; a sort of shelter for the man who looked after the grapes. It was made of rough masonry and had no door. I plunged into its darkness and, overcoming my first hesitation, lay down on a sack.

When I woke up, it was the middle of the night; my back and neck were painfully stiff. A dog was barking not far away. I imagined it roving round in the night, tortured with hunger. It was not light enough to see the country from the door. The dog's barking was the only audible noise in the whole world in that darkness. Still half asleep I sat up and I started off again before dawn to avoid being seen emerging from the place. The moon was rising. When I turned round I realised that it was

merely a ruined chapel; you could still see the remains of a cracked pink window. "You don't even have to look for it", I thought, inwardly repeating a familiar phrase.

Dawn followed the moon, and I was cold, hungry and frightened. I lay curled up in a cornfield, cursing the dew, thinking of the dead and the blood. "Thinking about it is a kind of prayer for them", I said.

When full dawn broke, I found the little cottages again and told the women the news. Otino had gone into the country. I asked permission to await his return in a hayloft. They offered me bread and soup, and as I ate, I calmed the women down concerning the probable effects of the shooting-up. "They are only combing that side of the Tinella", I said, "otherwise I couldn't have got across".

A great wind swept over the slopes on the days that followed and from the top I could see the series of hillcrests, the small trees, houses and avenues as far as the distant woods. Otino pointed out the sanctuary belfry to me and a turn in the road where the slaughter had taken place. He wandered over the flat ground separating the hillcrests, met various people and exchanged news with them. One morning we noticed a column of smoke rising from among the trees. The same evening we heard that there had been another clash near the Tanaro—a column of German and Fascist soldiers had swooped down on the slope, shooting, plundering and setting fire to everything.

At nights I slept in haylofts; I had borrowed a blanket. The gusty wind dropped towards evening and I strained my ears for the crack of rifle-shots, or the sound of cries. I remained with Otino and the others in

the open fields, and the stars never seemed to have been so bright before. Against a background of shrilling grasshoppers we searched the darkness with our eyes, for signs of conflagrations or beacon fires. We caught sight of an ominous glow against the vast blackness of the hills. "You want to make a note of this", said Otino to me, "you pass over that way. Where they have blazed a trail there won't be any more supervision".

I was anxious to pay for the food I had had. His mother did not refuse it; but everybody wondered why the war never ended. "Which of you would gain any benefit if it went on for a century?" I asked. I noticed a blood-stain from a slaughtered rabbit under the arch. "You see how it is?" said Otino, "we shall all have to make an end like this".

I took him into the vineyard where I had entered that night and told him that it seemed to me to be a good place of refuge. "We would be safe sleeping in a church", said Otino. "The churches will be full". "There isn't a church left here", I replied — "they've stripped the trees of walnut and set fire to the ground".

"We used to come and play here when we were boys".

As we went in, we discoursed on what it was like in the district and how everybody lived in the fear that even along the railway you might be the target of a German bullet, or a lorry would be held up. "Have they set fire to the churches there?" I remarked suddenly. "If that was all they had burnt it would be nothing", he replied.

One evening we collected all the branches there were, and with the aid of old paper maize-bags lit a fire in

the corner by the window. Then we sat in front of the flames and smoked a cigarette as boys do. We joked about it. "We know how to start fires too". I was not at ease to begin with and went outside to study the window, but there wasn't much of a reflection and moreover it was screened by a hillock. "It's certainly not visible", said Otino. Then on another occasion we discussed what some of the peasants looked like and those who were more frightened than we were. "Even they can't be said to be alive any longer. This isn't living. They know the time is coming".

"We are all in the front line".

Otino laughed. A shot rang out in the distance.

"There they go", I said.

We listened hard. The wind dropped. The dogs were barking. "Let's go back", I said. I spent that night, tossing restlessly, frightened by my thoughts. The rustle of hay seemed to fill the night.

Next day I once more scrutinised the barrier of hills which was awaiting me. They were white and dried by the wind and the weather, looking trim under the sky. Again I wondered whether the terrible business had yet reached the woods yonder. I went up the lane to go and buy some bread in the village. The people looked at me from their doors, suspicious and inquisitive. I nodded to them as I passed. Other hills were discernible from the piazza; they looked like banks of pink cloud. I stopped by the church with the sun beating down on me. I felt buoyed up in this brightness and tranquillity, and could not believe in what was really going on. One day life would be resumed in the old way, safe and steady as it was just at that moment. I had forgotten what it was

like for too long. Slaughter and plundering could not last for ever. I stood there with my back to the church for some time.

A girl came out. She looked round her and then went down the road. For a moment she too became part of that world of hope. She kept her eyes fixed on the rough stones as she descended the road in the wind. She did not look in my direction.

I did not see a living soul on the little piazza, and the piled-up red roofs which until yesterday had offered a safe hide-out, I now thought of as the lairs of animals from which the quarry would be smoked out. The problem had become that of resisting the flames until another day had gone by. One must resist if only to find peace again.

That evening came rumours of a clash in the next valley near a village inhabited by women and old men. They swore it was true, but in actual fact not a shot had been heard. The stables had been merely turned out and the haylofts set alight. The people who had taken refuge in the ravines had heard the calves lowing but were unable to get to them. It had happened during the late morning at the time when I had been looking over that way from the church.

Otino was reaping in the fields and heard the news without interrupting his work.

"A good job you advised me not to continue on my way", I said.

He straightened his back and passed his hands over his eyes. "Go along at night when it's not so hot".

We discussed the matter again that night and I concluded that it was better for me to follow the Tinella

than make for the hills. I set off next day and by the evening I was home with my parents, beyond the woods and Belbo.

XXIII

Nothing has happened. I have been home six months now and the war still goes on. Indeed now that the weather is deteriorating, the armies on the main fronts have retreated to consolidate their positions, and another winter will go by and we shall see the snow again and huddle round the fire, listening to the wireless. On the roads and in the vineyards November inud is beginning to impede the movements of the guerilla bands; everybody says that this winter no one will have any stomach left for fighting. It will be hard to live in the world, expecting to die in the spring. If we get heavy falls of snow, like last year's, as they say we will, blocking doors and windows, it might as well never thaw out.

We have had our dead here, too. Apart from this and the alarms and disconcerting flights with our goods and chattels into the valleys behind our houses (my sister or mother rouse me and I wildly snatch up my trousers and slippers and run, bent double across the vineyard and then follows the tense and demoralising wait). Apart from these disturbances and the general ignominy, nothing happens. Not one day went by in September without shots being fired on the hills or on the iron bridge — isolated shots such as are heard during the hunting season, bursts of fire, too, sometimes. Now they are becoming less frequent. It is the real woodland life such as one dreams of it in childhood. And sometimes I think it takes a boy's unawakened conscience, his genuine, unaffected unawareness to accept what is happening without suffering from fits of repentance. The

heroes of these valleys in any case are all boys, they have the same obstinate, unflinching gaze. But for the fact that we — who are no longer young — cherished war in our hearts and said, 'Let it come then, if it has to come' — even war, *this* war might seem a clean business. Anyhow, who knows. This war is burning down our houses. It is sowing the squares and roads with people who have been executed. We are being driven from one hiding-place to the next like so many hunted hares. In the end it will force us to fight too, extorting an active consent from us. And the day will come when no one will be outside the war — not even the coward, the despairing, the recluse. I have been thinking about it all continually since I have been living here with my parents. We must all consent to take part in the war and then perhaps we shall have peace.

Despite the times we are living in, the corn-cobs have been gathered in on the farms and we have harvested the grapes. Not, of course, with the cheerful gaiety of past years — too many faces, some permanently, alas, are missing. Among my fellow-countrymen only the old and middle-aged know me, but the hill still remains for me a country of childhood, bonfires, games and adventures. If I had Dino here with me, I could still give him his orders; but he has gone to play a more serious part. At his age it is easy. It has been more difficult for the others who have played it already or are in the act of doing so.

Now that the countryside is bare, I begin walking round again; climb and descend the hill and reflect on the long illusion which lies behind this account of my life. Wherever this illusion may lead me, I feel my

thoughts are bound up with it; what else can I think about? Here every step I take, almost every hour of the day, and certainly every sudden memory makes me realise what I was — what I am and had forgotten. Obsessed as I am by the chance encounters of this year, I sometimes find myself asking, "What common ground have I with this man who took refuge from the bombs, ran away from the Germans and from sorrow and remorse?" Not that I do not feel distressed when I think of those who have disappeared or think of those nightmare figures who run along the roads like bitches; I say that something more is still required that we cannot exorcise the horror until it possesses us who survive. But then the 'I', this 'I' which sees me trying to sort out cautiously the faces and mad behaviour of these latter days, feels as if it were another person, completely detached, as if everything it had done, said and undergone was merely something that might have occurred before, as if it was other people's concern, past history. And this feeling deludes me, for here in this house I re-discover an old reality, a life stretching back before my present years, beyond Elvira, Cate, Dino and the school and my hopes and desires as a man, and I wonder if I will ever be able to escape from it. Now I realise that throughout the present year and even before, even in the period of my half-hearted extravagances, of the days with Anna Maria, Gallo, Cate — when we were still young and the war was a distant cloud — I have lived a life of prolonged isolation, a kind of futile holiday; I have been like a boy who in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek plunges into a thicket, finds it good there, losing himself in the contemplation of the

• sky between the foliage and forgets to come out again.

For it is back to these woods here that the war has brought me, and continues to bring me. If I walk in the woods, take refuge in the ravines at every suspicion of the presence of searching soldiers, or chat with partisans on their way through (Giorgi, too, has been here with his men and jerking back his head, remarked, "We will have time to talk about it all again during the winter evenings"), it is not because I do not see that the war, this war that has come out as far as this place and seizes the whole of our past by the throat, is not a game. I do not know whether Cate, Fonso, Dino and all the others will ever return. Sometimes I hope they will and then I get in a panic. But I have looked on dead who are unknown to me, the dead of the Republic. It was seeing them that awakened me. If a stranger, a dying enemy has this effect, and one stops and is afraid to stride over his body, it means that even conquered, the enemy is still a human being, that having shed his blood, we must placate it, lend it a voice, justify whoever has spilt it. Looking at corpses is humiliating. They are not other people's concern; we cannot feel we have just chanced to be at that spot. We have the impression that the same fate which had stretched these bodies on the ground, nails us here to look at them, to fill our eyes with the sight of them. It is not fear, nor common cowardice. It is humiliation. We learn through our eyes that it might well be ourselves in the place of these dead and it would be no different and that if we are alive, we owe it to this sullied corpse. Because every war is a civil war; every man who falls resembles the one who survives and calls him to account.

Some days in this bare country I give a sudden start, as I stroll along; a dry tree-trunk, a knot of grass, a ridge of rock takes on the appearance of a corpse lying there. It is still a possibility. I am sorry that Belbo was left behind in Turin. I spend part of the day in the kitchen, the enormous kitchen with its walls of beaten earth where my mother, sister and the women of the house make the preserves. My father makes journeys to the cellar as slowly as old Gregorio. Sometimes I wonder whether the house will be demolished as the result of reprisals or by some freak of fate and its four walls charred and flattened. It has already happened to many houses. What would my father do, what would the women say? Their tone is always, "If they would only stop for a while", and for them these local clashes as much as the war itself are the boyish scraps that follow in the wake of saint's-day celebrations. If the partisans demand flour or cattle, my father says, "It's not just. They haven't the right. Why can't they ask for it in the proper way as a gift!" "Who has the right then?" I ask. "Wait until it's all over and then we'll see", he replies.

But I cannot believe that it can end. Now that I have seen what war, civil war is, I know that if it should finish one day, everybody will have to ask himself this question, "And what about those who have fallen? What do we do about them? Why are they dead?" I would not know what reply to make. Not at present anyway. Nor does it seem to me that anyone else knows either. Perhaps only the dead know and only for them is the war really over.

